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**Census Report “Cognitive Testing Results for the Current
Population Survey Food Security Supplement”**

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**Cognitive Testing Results for the Current Population Survey
Food Security Supplement**

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Abstract

This report documents the results from cognitive testing of the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS FSS). Testing was conducted from June 2019 to October 2019 by the Center for Behavioral Science Methods at the U.S. Census Bureau (CBSM). The purpose of this testing was to: 1) ascertain how participants interpreted new questions and modifications to existing questions about food insecurity and food purchases, 2) make sure the language in existing survey questions was still relevant to respondents, and 3) test the feasibility of changing the order of two topic sections in the survey. Overall, we found that new questions performed well, minor updates to language helped ensure the questions were understood as intended, and changing the order did not introduce any issues. This report contains the results from three rounds of testing as well as CBSM's final recommendations for wording for the instrument.

Keywords: cognitive testing, cognitive interviews, food insecurity, food security, Current Population Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from cognitive testing of the 2018 Food Security Supplement (FSS) which is administered on an annual basis in December as part of the Current Population Survey (CPS). This testing was conducted because the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) wanted to ensure all question wording remains relevant, since most of the questions were written over 25 years ago. ERS also wanted to conduct cognitive testing of several new questions, as well as switching the order of two sections, before fielding them in a split panel test. Modifications included changes to the *Food Purchase* section, more inclusive items in the *Ways of Coping with not Having Enough Food* section, and moving the *Food Sufficiency and Food Security* section before the *Food Program Participation* section.

Overall, the findings from cognitive testing indicate that most questions in the FSS are being interpreted as intended and only minor changes, documented in this report, are needed to update the question wording. We found that the few modifications ERS and the Center for Behavioral Science Methods (CBSM) recommended seemed to improve the quality of data collected, especially in the *Food Expenditure* and *Ways of Coping with not Having Enough Food* sections. Switching the order of the *Food Sufficiency and Food Security* section and the *Food Program Participation* section questions also seemed to not introduce any issues.

All the recommended changes in this report will be tested in a split-panel experiment that will be conducted in the CPS and is planned for September 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the request of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS), the Center for Behavioral Science and Methods (CBSM) conducted an expert review and cognitive testing of the 2018 Food Security Supplement (FSS). The FSS has been administered as a supplemental survey in the Current Population Survey (CPS) in December of every year since 2001. Section I of the FSS, *Food Expenditures*, is asked of every household in the CPS population as it is a data source on the amount of money Americans spend on food on a weekly basis. Section II, *Minimum Spending Needed to Have Enough Food*, is also asked of everyone. Some questions on food hardship and food insufficiency are used as screener questions for the remaining sections of the survey. If the respondent indicates they have experienced food insufficiency, or if the household income is less than 185 percent above the federal poverty line, they are then asked Sections III, *Food Sufficiency and Security* (formerly Section IV), Section IV *Food Program Participation* (formerly Section III), and finally Section V *Ways of Coping with Not Having Enough Food*.

Before cognitive testing, changes were made to the existing questions based on suggestions from ERS and an expert review by CBSM. One of the biggest changes to the survey was switching the order of the sections on *Food Sufficiency and Security* and *Food Program Participation*. In the current survey, *Food Program Participation* is asked before *Food Sufficiency and Security*; in cognitive testing, it was asked fourth. The order was changed because ERS was concerned that asking about food program participation before asking about food insecurity may have been influencing the answers to the food security items. In particular, ERS was concerned that respondents may feel the need to report food insecurity after they have reported participation in nutrition assistance. Additionally, FSS was written over 25 years ago so ERS was concerned that some of the questions in the FSS contained dated language that was no longer widely used or understood. Several new questions proposed by ERS were also included in cognitive testing. Once the questionnaire was adapted based on the expert review process, three rounds of cognitive testing were conducted in the greater Washington, D.C. area. During testing, terminology was updated throughout the survey based on an expert review and a Google Trends search, where applicable.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data Collection

Thirty interviews over three rounds of iterative cognitive testing were conducted between June and October 2019 in the greater Washington, D.C. area. Four experienced cognitive interviewers in CBSM were trained on the cognitive interview protocol and conducted the cognitive interviews. Participants received \$40 cash after the interview. The goals of cognitive interviewing were to determine:

- 1) Are the revised and new questions being interpreted consistently as intended?
- 2) Are the current items ERS or CBSM identified as potentially problematic being correctly interpreted?
- 3) Is switching Sections III and IV introducing any unintended issues?

In each interview, cognitive interviewers administered the full CPS FSS with the new section order for III and IV, and asked retrospective probes at the end of each section. The CPS FSS is a Computer Assisted Personal Interview/Computer Assisted Telephone Interview mode, but for cognitive interviewing we used a modified paper version of the instrument that also contained follow up probes. In order to test the full instrument with revised and new questions in under 60 minutes and allow time for retrospective probing, we decided to omit a think aloud protocol. Participants were asked retrospective probes on all revised and new items, as well as any items that ERS was concerned may be outdated or confusing. All thirty participants received the full CPS FSS survey, despite the fact most participants screen out of Sections III-V if they do not indicate food insufficiency or meet the income guidelines when the survey is administered formally in the CPS. Only age restrictions were used to exclude questions, since these items would not apply or make sense to households that did not contain the targeted populations.

Upon arrival participants were told that the Census Bureau was working with the US Department of Agriculture to develop questions for a survey we would conduct for the USDA. They were asked to sign a consent form and informed that all of their information would be kept confidential. They were also asked for their permission to audio record and when applicable informed there was an observer.

Participants were told to treat the survey questions as if the interviewer had come to their home. They were prompted throughout the survey when the “real interview” was being conducted and when we were asking some additional background questions.

There were three rounds of testing. The first round of testing had 8 participants, followed by 11 in round 2 and 11 in round 3. The protocol and questions were modified based on the previous round’s findings for Rounds 2 and 3. All of these changes are detailed in this report.

2.2 Analysis

Interviewers listened to the audio recording of their interviews and completed summaries in a standard template for all 30 interviews. Personally identifiable information (PII) such as names were not included in the summaries and participants were referred to using ID numbers. Summaries included the participant’s response to each survey or scripted probe question as well as interviewer observations for each question and probe. After all three rounds a consensus meeting was held to discuss major findings and any issues that came up during interviews. All summaries were compiled into a briefing document. Recommendations for the next round were based on these findings and included in the document. All interviewers independently reviewed the briefing document before it was sent to ERS.

2.3 Recruiting Methods and Respondent Characteristics

Across all rounds, participants were recruited using posts on Craigslist.com, NEXTdoor.com and a Census Headquarters blast e-mail. In Rounds 2 and 3, recruitment was also conducted at a community college and food pantry in the greater Washington DC area. The requirements for recruitment were that the person had to live with at least one other person and have a household

income below \$50,000¹. This threshold was chosen because the high cost of living in the DC area means that food insecurity can be a problem even at \$50,000. Lowering the income threshold below this might have limited the pool of potential participants too much. Ideally, participants also lived with at least one child so that the questions related to children's food insecurity and school food programs could be tested. The majority of participants lived with children. Household sizes ranged from one person to 11, but 23 participants lived with three or more people and seven participants lived with over five people. Participants also represented a diversity of ages from 18 to over 65 as well as a diversity of education levels. The majority of participants identified as black (17 people).

¹ In Round 2, the income threshold was increased to \$75,000 to help increase the number of potential participants. For Round 3, it was set back at \$50,000 or less.

Table 1: Respondent Characteristics

Participant Characteristics	Number of Participants
Household Size	
1 ²	1
2	6
3	11
4	5
5-11	7
Presence of Children	
At least one person under 18 in household	20
No one under 18 in household	10
Age	
18-40	10
41-60	2
61+	8
Not asked ³	10
Race	
White	1
Black	17
Asian	2
Not asked	10
Education	
High school diploma or less	7
Some college or Associate's Degree	7
Bachelor's degree or higher	6
Not asked	10
Household Income	
Less than \$15,000	4
\$15,000-\$25,000	6
\$25,000-\$50,000	10
Only asked if below \$75,000 ⁴	10
Gender	
Male	7
Female	13
Not asked	10

² One participant lived alone due to a recruitment error. They still met the income guidelines.

³ The participants who were recruited at a food pantry or community college were not given the full demographic screener. Due to time and staff constraints, they were interviewed on the spot after confirming they met the basic recruitment criteria.

⁴ For the community college recruitment, participants were asked a "yes or no" question if the household income was below \$75,000. For the food pantry recruitment participants were asked if their household income was below \$50,000.

3. RESULTS

This report contains only questions that were 1) modified from the original production 2018 FSS instrument, 2) identified as problematic during cognitive testing, and/or 3) had a scripted probe question during at least one round of interviewing. Any item from the 2018 CPS FSS that is not mentioned in this report was not found to be problematic during cognitive testing and we are not recommending any changes at this time.

Throughout the results section when a change is made to a question that contains follow-up questions that ask about more specific time frames (“12 months” vs “in the last 30 days”) the changes were made and recommended for the follow-up questions, but are not discussed below to avoid redundancy and for length.

We use tables to show the current production question wording in the FSS, the wording tested in Rounds 1, 2, and 3, and the final recommended wording. Changes made to the questions between rounds are shown in red.

3.1 Section I Food Expenditures

3.1.1 Food Purchase Places

There were two major changes for Section I. First, we updated the types of places listed as examples in questions to more accurately reflect current consumer behavior. Second, we tested grouping questions together to ask about food purchased for consumption at home versus away from home. See Table 1 for a display of the question wording across rounds.

Round 1 Findings

The first item in Section I asked about food purchased at grocery stores then the second question asks about more specific food stores such as produce stands, meat markets, warehouse clubs, etc. The third question asks participants about their food purchases from places for food eaten away from home, such as at restaurants, cafeterias, or vending machines. Finally participants are asked a catch all about any food purchases from other (unspecified) places. Participants are then asked four follow-up questions about how much they spent at each of these places. The ultimate goal of this series of questions is to determine the total amount spent on food in a typical week. The individual questions are designed to remind participants about places they may have bought food, to find out how much they spent, and to determine how much of that was spent on non-food items. In Round 1, CBSM experimented with combining three items into two items, one of which asked about food purchases to be eaten at home and the other which asked about food to be eaten away from home. This was done to reduce the number of questions asked and potentially improve recall by grouping the types of food purchases by where they were typically consumed.

Table 1: Food Purchase Places (S1A, S1B, S1C, S1D)

Item Number	Current CPS FSS Survey Wording	Round 1 Wording	Round 2 Wording	Round 3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
S1A	First did (you/anyone in your household) shop for food at a supermarket or grocery store last week?	First, did (anyone in your household) shop for food at a supermarket, grocery store, superstore (for example Walmart or Target), dollar store, butcher shop, farmers market or club store LAST WEEK?	First, did (anyone in your household) shop for food at a supermarket, grocery store, superstore (for example Walmart or Target)?	First, did (you/anyone in your household) shop for food at a supermarket, grocery store, Walmart or Target LAST WEEK?
S1B	Think about other places where people buy food, such as meat markets, produce stands, bakeries, warehouse clubs, and convenience stores. Did (you/anyone in your household) buy food from any stores such as these LAST WEEK?		Think about other places where people buy food, such as dollar stores, pharmacies , club stores, farmers markets, or butcher shops. Did (you/anyone in your household) buy food from any stores such as these LAST WEEK?	Think about other places where people buy food, such as dollar stores, pharmacies, club stores, farmers markets, or online . Did (you/anyone in your household) buy food from any stores such as these LAST WEEK?
S1C	LAST WEEK, did (you/anyone in your household) buy food at a restaurant, fast food place, cafeteria, or vending machine? (Include any children who may have bought food at the school cafeteria).	LAST WEEK, did (you/anyone in your household) buy food at a restaurant, fast food place, cafeteria, deli, convenience store , or vending machine?	No changes	LAST WEEK, did (you/anyone in your household) buy food at a restaurant, fast food place, cafeteria, deli, convenience store, or vending machine?
S1D	Did (you/anyone in your household) buy food from any other kind of place LAST WEEK?	No changes	No changes	Did (you/anyone in your household) buy food from any other kind of place LAST WEEK?

For Round 1, the wording to ask about food purchases for consumption at home combined the first and second questions into one item. In addition to combining the items, the term “supercenter (for example Walmart or Target)” was added to the question because these stores account for a significant share of food expenditure, according to ERS. ERS also requested the replacement of “meat market” with “butcher shop,” “produce stands” with “farmers market,” and “warehouse clubs” with “club stores” because a Google Trends search showed the latter terms were more common than the former. This wording was also more consistent with other food surveys such as the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey, which gathers data about where American households buy food.

For purchases to be consumed away from home, the modification to the existing item was minor and included the addition of “deli” and “convenience store” to the list of examples.

The list of potential places in the new combined item proved to be overwhelming for interviewers to read and difficult for participants to remember all the choices mentioned. There did not seem to be any reduction in burden gained by combining the two items. Participants seemed to forget the full list of stores, and CBSM was concerned it would be problematic to get interviewers to read the full list during production data collection. Based on spontaneous comments made by participants, it appeared that the idea of grouping stores by where the food might be consumed was not helpful in reminding them about purchases. Both grocery stores and convenience stores had a lot of ready to eat foods and participants mentioned fast food was often taken to be eaten at home. The two items did not seem to provide the intended stimulus of food to be eaten at home vs away from home. Given there is a gray area as far as where food is ultimately consumed, this methodology was not helpful to participants to remind them about food purchases.

One participant mentioned buying food at CVS, but said she thought it did not really fit in any of the questions asked so she did not include the cost of her purchases at the CVS when she was later asked to report the amount spent.

Round 1 Recommendations

CBSM recommended splitting the two items back into three items but keeping the modifications to the types of places listed. CBSM also recommended adding “pharmacy” to the second question about other places to buy food because a significant proportion of food stamps are redeemed at CVS and drug stores according to ERS.

Round 2 and 3 Findings

In Rounds 2 and 3 it worked better to separate the two items about food purchases at grocery stores (or superstores) and food purchases at other stores that sell groceries, such as butcher shops, and club stores. This was easier for interviewers to read and for participants to recall the full list of places mentioned before they answered.

In Round 2, one participant mentioned buying food online and was not sure where a person would report this because no item specifically mentioned this option. They also mentioned that there has been a recent rise in online grocery purchases.

The fourth question in Section 1 asks about “any other kind of place.” ERS was curious whether this item was actually acting as a catch-all question and what other kinds of places participants were including. This question worked as a catch-all question for most participants, but several participants across all three rounds said they were thinking of grocery stores or another place that was specifically listed by a preceding question when they said “yes” to this question. Most of these participants reported the money spent under the grocery store amount question, discussed below in 3.1.2, and they then reported \$0 when asked about the amount spent at the “other place”. A few participants incorrectly reported the amount spent under the “other place” question instead, but still ended up ultimately reporting the correct total since the amount is summed across all questions. No participants incorrectly included the amount twice under different questions. The “other places” mentioned included by participants included a fall festival, a home food catering service, an online shopping service like Amazon (mentioned before the word “online” was added in Round 3), and food trucks.

Round 2 and 3 Recommendations

After Round 2, CBSM wanted to shorten the first question (S1A) because it continued to be difficult for interviewers to read and participants to remember. A Google Trends search showed that “supercenter” is a relatively unused term and people more commonly search for Walmart or Target. In fiscal year 2019, 53 percent of all SNAP benefits were redeemed at super stores, such as Walmart (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2020). Therefore, we thought it was important to include it in the question. However, most respondents were less familiar with “supercenter” than the brand names of Walmart or Target. For this reason, CBSM recommended dropping the word “supercenter” and just saying “Walmart or Target.”

CBSM also recommended adding the word “online” to the second question in place of “butcher shops.” We recommended this because “butcher shops” are less common than the other types of stores mentioned. This also allows for the addition of “online” without increasing the length of the question.

3.1.2 Food Place Purchase Amounts

Round 1 to 3 Findings

These follow-up questions are intended to capture the amount of money spent at each of the places the respondent indicates they spent money. ERS expressed concern about the use of the word “actually” in the lead and questions S2, S4, and S6. Prior to cognitive testing, we changed the wording of the question to “How much did (you/anyone in your household) spend in total at ...” which we thought would be more polite and correctly reflect the intent of the question. Across three rounds of testing, the modified question worked well.

Table 2: Food Place Purchase Amounts (SLEAD, S2, S4, S6)

Item number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1 Wording	Round 2-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
Lead	Now I'm going to ask you about the ACTUAL amount you spent on food LAST WEEK in all the places where you bought food. Then, since LAST WEEK may have been unusual for you, I will ask about the amount you USUALLY spend.	Now I'm going to ask you about the TOTAL amount you spent on food LAST WEEK in all the places where you bought food. Then, since LAST WEEK may have been unusual for you, I will ask about the amount you USUALLY spend.	N/A	Now I'm going to ask you about the TOTAL amount you spent on food LAST WEEK in all the places where you bought food. Then, since LAST WEEK may have been unusual for you, I will ask about the amount you USUALLY spend.
S2	How much did (you/anyone in your household) ACTUALLY spend at supermarkets and grocery stores LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with <SNAPNAME1> or food stamp benefits)?	How much did (anyone in your household) spend in total at supermarkets, grocery stores, superstores (like Walmart or Target), dollar stores, butcher shops, farmers markets or club stores LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits)?	How much did (anyone in your household) spend in total at supermarkets, grocery stores, or superstores (like Walmart or Target) LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits)?	How much did (you/anyone in your household) spend in total at supermarkets, grocery stores, Walmart or Target LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with <SNAPNAME1> or food stamp benefits)?
S4	How much did (you/your household) spend at stores such as meat markets, produce stands, bakeries, warehouse clubs, and convenience stores LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with <SNAPNAME1> or food stamp benefits)?		How much did your household spend at stores such as dollar stores, drug stores ⁵ , club stores, farmers markets, or butcher shops LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits)?	How much did (you/your household) spend at stores such as dollar stores, pharmacies, club stores, farmers markets, or online LAST WEEK (including any purchases made with <SNAPNAME1> or food stamp benefits)?

⁵ In Round 2 there was a mistake in the protocol and “pharmacy” was mistakenly replaced with “drug stores” in item S4. No known issues came up in testing from this and the mistake was corrected before Round 3.

Item number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1 Wording	Round 2-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
S6	How much did (you/your household) spend for food at restaurants, fast food places, cafeterias, and vending machines LAST WEEK, not including alcohol purchases?	How much did (your household) spend for food at restaurants, fast food places, cafeterias, delis , convenience stores , and vending machines LAST WEEK, not including alcohol purchases (including any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits)?	N/A	How much did (you/your household) spend for food at restaurants, fast food places, cafeterias, delis, convenience stores, and vending machines LAST WEEK, not including alcohol purchases (including any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits)?

ERS was wondering whether participants were including children buying school lunch in the amount reported under the appropriate follow-up question that mentions cafeterias. When probed, participants with children said they were thinking about them in their answer; however, the price of their lunch was free or a reduced amount, and they were not sure how much it was. Parents who sent a lunch with their child or purchased a full price lunch did include this amount in what they reported.

When asked if they included food stamps in the amounts reported throughout Section I, participants who had indicated they received food assistance said ‘yes’.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

Changes to the lead in and items S2, S4, and S6 included changes in the places asked about and asking about “the total amount spent” vs the “actual amount.” These changes seemed to work well in cognitive testing and no further changes were recommended.

3.1.3 Non-Food Spending

Table 3 Non-Food Spending (S3A, S5A)

Item number	Current Survey Wording/ Round 1-3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
S3A& S5A	How much of the \$(fill) was for non-food items, such as pet food, paper products, alcohol, detergents, or cleaning supplies?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

After asking about the amount spent at each of the places for items S2 and S4 (3.1.2), participants are then asked to report how much of the amount was for non-food purchases. ERS was concerned that the list of examples may not be comprehensive enough and participants may therefore be underreporting. We cautioned against adding additional examples before verifying that participants were excluding non-food purchases that were not explicitly listed. We recommended testing the question as it was and then during probing we reminded participants how much they reported and asked about the types of non-food items they purchased. Across all three rounds, most participants gave an example of something that was not explicitly listed or something more specific than the examples listed (for example, for “paper products” they reported paper towels or plates.). Examples of other items reported included toiletries, medicine, makeup, clothing, and shoes. This suggested participants were not underreporting in response to this question and no further modification was needed.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

Given participants were interpreting the item as intended and including all non-food items, we did not recommend any changes to this item.

3.1.4 Food Purchase Check

Table 4 Food Purchase Check (S8A, S8ZA)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
S8A	Let's see, (your household) spent about (SUM OF 1B+2B+3B-1C) on food LAST WEEK. Now think about how much (anyone in your household) USUALLY spends. How much (does your household) USUALLY spend on food at all the different places we've been talking about IN A WEEK? (Please include any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits). Do not include non-food items such as pet food, paper products, detergent or cleaning supplies.	No changes	Let's see, (your household) spent about (SUM OF 1B+2B+3B-1C) on food LAST WEEK. Now think about how much (anyone in your household) USUALLY spends. How much (does your household) USUALLY spend on food at all the different places we've been talking about IN A WEEK? (Please include any purchases made with (SNAP/ Food Supplement Program) or food stamp benefits). Do not include non-food items such as pet food, paper products, detergent or cleaning supplies.
S8ZA	Let's see, it seems that (your household) did not buy any food LAST WEEK. If that is because you shop for food infrequently, how much would the weekly average be over several weeks?	Let's see, it seems that (your household) did not buy any food LAST WEEK. If that is because you shop for food only once in a while, how much would you say you spend in total in a month?	Let's see, it seems that (your household) did not buy any food LAST WEEK. If that is because you shop for food only once in a while, how much would you say you spend in total in a month?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

After asking about the types of places and amount spent on food, Section I branches off into two paths depending on whether the participant reported any food expense in the past week.

If a participant reports any amount, they are asked S8A which is a check that the week was representative of a current typical week, and that there was not an event that changed food purchasing habits. ERS requested that CBSM probe on how participants were interpreting the word “usually” in the question. Across three rounds, the synonyms mentioned to interpret “usually” included: normally, consistently, in general, or “on average spend on food in a week,” as opposed to a week that is a “splurge” or special occasion. The question appeared to be interpreted as intended, it worked as a check on the weekly total and whether the last week was outside of their normal spending pattern.

The other question is for participants who reported no food expenses in the prior week, they are asked S8ZA which asks them to calculate an average weekly purchase amount over several weeks. CBSM was concerned that the cognitive burden of this question was too high because “infrequently” is a higher register word and the cognitive task of calculating a weekly average over “several” weeks is difficult and ambiguous. It is generally better to not ask participants to calculate a number when we can ask a simpler question and then do the computations ourselves. We did not

have any participants across the three rounds who reported no food purchases in the preceding week. However, starting in Round 2, we asked participants during probing if they would be able to report a monthly total of their food expenses. Participants reported they would be able to do this and mentioned using a variety of tactics, including thinking back to an unusual month where they only shopped once all month, but most said they would multiply the weekly amount by four.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

No further changes were recommended to S8A, the question for participants who reported any weekly food expense.

Given most participants can report a monthly amount, CBSM recommended changing S8ZA, the question for participants with no weekly food expenses, to the proposed wording.

3.2 Section II Minimum Spending Need to Have Enough Food

3.2.1 Buying Enough Food to Meet Needs

Table 5 Buying Enough Food to Meet Needs (S8B, S8C, S8D)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording/ Round 1-3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
S8B	In order to buy just enough food to meet (your needs/the needs of your household), would you need to spend more than you do now, or could you spend less?
S8C	[If more] About how much MORE would you need to spend each week to buy just enough food to meet the needs of your household?
S8D	[If less] About how much LESS could you spend each week and still buy enough food to meet the needs of your household?

Round 1-3 Findings

Section II contains only two questions, but they are useful for understanding respondent’s food spending. Participants are asked if they need to spend more than they do now or if they could spend less to meet the food needs of their household. They are then asked a follow-up on how much more or less they could spend. ERS was concerned that the phrase “the needs of your household” was too ambiguous and that they may need to add a more specific definition for this term and mention being able to afford “healthy foods” in the question. They also raised the issue that it was unclear if participants were including the amount they receive in food aid in their answer. CBSM did not recommend any changes to the item, but we did ask participants several probes about the question. Across all three rounds, participants interpreted “the needs of your household” to mean enough food to meet the nutritional needs of everyone in their household. When asked to elaborate they said that the question was asking if they could afford to spend less than they do now and still buy enough food for everyone, or alternatively if they weren’t meeting the needs of their household and needed more money. CBSM did not recommend any changes to the item since it was being consistently interpreted as intended and a reference to “healthy foods” could introduce more confusion or variation in interpretation.

A few participants in each round said that they currently spend just the right amount and that neither more nor less fits their circumstances. In the production FSS, interviewers can accept “neither” as an answer and move on without a follow-up question. ERS said they did not want to offer neither as a third option that is read aloud.

CBSM did not directly ask participants if they included food stamps in their answer, but several participants indicated through spontaneous comments, that they were including their food stamp allocation when they answered the first item. In fact, one participant interpreted the item to be asking if her food stamp money was enough to meet her needs and she said she needed more because she had to spend additional money out of her own pocket.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM did not recommend changes to this item because it appears to be interpreted as intended by the majority of participants. ERS should be aware that participants are probably including their food stamp benefits when they respond to this question.

3.3 Section III Food Sufficiency and Food Security

Section III: Food Sufficiency and Security used to be *Section IV* what is now *Food Program Participation*. Swapping the order of these questions did not seem to cause any confusion.

Table 6 Section Introduction (SS1_LEAD)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1 to 3 Wording/ Final Recommended Wording
SS1_LEAD	People do different things when they are running out of money for food to make their food or their food money go further.	The next questions are about the food eaten in your household in the last 12 months since December of last year, and whether you were able to afford the food you need.

Round 1 to 3 Findings

After the section order was switched CBSM recommended replacing the lead-in text with just the existing introductory text for the section. ERS was concerned how “afford the food you need” was being interpreted so we probed on this in Rounds 1 and 2. All participants seemed to have a clear and consistent interpretation of the phrase and they indicated it was asking if they could afford to buy enough food to get by. Some example quotes:

- “I can purchase it and it’s enough to feed the family”
- "If you have the money to actually buy the things you need, and if you don't, then you go without. The difference between that is I don't need to go without but there's food there. It doesn't matter whether I want to eat it or not.”

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

We recommend using the lead in text for *Section III* as it is presented above. “Afford the food you need” is consistently interpreted.

3.3.1 Balanced vs Healthy

Table 7 Balanced vs Healthy (SS4, SS6)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SS4	"(I/we) couldn't afford to eat balanced meals."	"(I/we) couldn't afford to eat healthy meals."	"(I/we) couldn't afford to eat balanced meals."
SS6	"(I/we) couldn't feed (the child in (my/our) household/the children) a balanced meal, because (I/we) couldn't afford that."	"(I/we) couldn't feed (the child in (my/our) household/the children) a healthy meal, because (I/we) couldn't afford that."	"(I/we) couldn't feed (the child in (my/our) household/the children) a balanced meal , because (I/we) couldn't afford that."

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS was concerned that the term “balanced” used in two questions in *Section III* may be dated and ambiguous. ERS had previously tested a version of item SS4 that replaced the term “balanced” with the term “nutritious.” They found this did not work well and cautioned CBSM to not use the term “nutritious.” After our expert review, we recommended replacing the term “balanced” with “healthy,” because Google Trends revealed the term “healthy meals” was used more frequently than “balanced meals.” However, after three rounds of cognitive testing we recommended reverting back to the original wording and not using the word “healthy.” The term “healthy” was confounded with unintended constructs including, but not limited to, “organic,” “more expensive name brands,” and “fresh vs. canned produce.” Further, the terms “balanced” and “healthy” do not appear to be measuring the same construct, which may be problematic for data trends. When probed, almost all participants could interpret what “balanced” meant and generally viewed it as meaning there was a variety of foods in a meal. The handful of participants who struggled to interpret “balanced” did not appear to have a clearer understanding of “healthy.” Starting in Round 2, we probed participants to see if they thought “balanced” and “healthy” meant the same thing. The majority of participants said it did, but most then appeared to contradict this by saying that a meal could be balanced without being healthy. Some participants said that balanced means “meat/vegetable/starch” and that a balanced meal could become unhealthy if it was fried. Other participants said that “balanced” ties back to the “chart/pyramid.” Despite the fact “balanced” can still mean “unhealthy” to participants, it does convey the idea that a person can afford a variety of foods such as meats, starch, and a vegetable.

ERS also wanted to know if participants thought that healthy or balanced is different for children and adults. For item SS6 we asked participants with children if what is healthy for a child is also healthy for adults. All participants said that what is healthy for adults is the same as for children. However, the examples given were slightly different and included more processed foods like pudding, Jell-O, and processed lunch snacks. One participant mentioned that kids need to avoid food dyes; they seemed to imply this was less of a concern for adults.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommended reverting back to the current instrument wording using the term “balanced” instead of “healthy” in items SS4 and SS6.

3.3.2 Enough Money for Food vs Money for Enough Food

3.3.3 Table 8 Enough Money for Food vs Money for Enough Food (SH2, SH3, SH4, SH5, SSH1, SSH2, SSH4, SSH5)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1 Wording	Round 2-3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
SSH2	In the last 12 months, did (you/ you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did (you/ you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did (you/ you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH3	In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH4	In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH5	In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH1	In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH2	In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of (the child's/any of the children's) meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of (the child's/any of the children's) meals because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of (the child's/any of the children's) meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH4	In the last 12 months, did (the child/ any of the children) ever skip a meal because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did (the child/ any of the children) ever skip a meal because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did (the child/ any of the children) ever skip a meal because there wasn't enough money for food?
SSH5	In the last 12 months, did (the child/any of the children) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, did (the child/any of the children) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't money for enough food?	In the last 12 months, did (the child/any of the children) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

Round 1 Findings

CBSM recommended a change throughout *Section III* in questions that use the phrase “there wasn’t enough money for food” because we were concerned that participants may interpret this to mean “there was no money for *any* food” rather than “there wasn’t money for *enough* food.” For Round 1, the phrase was changed to “there wasn’t money for enough food.” During probing, we gave participants a handout and asked them to compare the phrases. Participants said they did not see much difference, and most said “enough money for food” is the way they and the people they know talk about it. We reverted to the production wording for Rounds 2 and 3; the current survey wording worked well in these rounds.

Round 1 Recommendation

CBSM recommended reverting back to the original wording of “there wasn’t enough money for food” after Round 1.

3.3.4 Couldn’t Afford vs There Wasn’t Enough Money (SH1, SSH3)

Table 9 Couldn’t Afford vs There Wasn’t Enough Money (SH1, SSH3)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SH1	(The child in (my/our) household was/The children were) not eating enough because (I/we) just couldn’t afford enough food.	(The child in (my/our) household was/The children were) not eating enough because there wasn’t enough money for food.	(The child in (my/our) household was/The children were) not eating enough because there wasn’t enough money for food.
SSH3	In the last 12 months, (was the child/were the children) ever hungry but you just couldn’t afford more food?	In the last 12 months, (was the child/were the children) ever hungry because there wasn’t enough money for food?	In the last 12 months, (was the child/were the children) ever hungry because there wasn’t enough money for food?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

Several of the questions in *Section III* that ask about food for children used the language of “but you just couldn’t afford more food?” rather than the more neutral phrasing of “there wasn’t enough money for food,” which is the default phrasing in *Section III* used when asking about adult food insecurity. In order to try to increase consistency across the survey and reduce the potential for social desirability bias, CBSM recommended replacing the phrase “but you just couldn’t afford more food” with “there wasn’t enough money for food.” This affected items SH1 and SSH3. No issues came up with this wording across all three rounds of testing.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

The new wording worked well across three rounds of testing and this wording was recommended as the final wording.

3.3.5 Food Security Screeners (S9)

Table 10 Food Security Screeners (S9)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
S9	In the last 12 months, since December of last year, did you ever run short of money and try to make your food or your food money go further?	In the last 12 months, since [Month of interview] of last year, did you ever run short of money and try to make your food or your food money go further?	In the last 12 months, since [Month of interview] of last year, did you ever run short of money and try to make your food or your food money go further?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

Section III contains a screener question that is used to determine if additional questions about food insecurity and assistance will be asked. The first item, S9, was kept at the beginning of the new *Section III* to still be used as a screener for *Sections IV* and *V*. No issues came up with the question being asked at the beginning of Food Sufficiency and Security.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendation

CBSM recommends keeping S9 at the beginning of the new *Section III Food Sufficiency and Security*.

3.3.6 Food Security Screeners (SS1)

Table 11 Food Security Screeners (SS1)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Item Number	Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SS1	Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household-- enough of the kinds of food (we) want to eat, enough but not always the kinds of food (we) want to eat, sometimes not enough to eat, or often not enough to eat?	SS1A	Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household-- (We) could always afford to eat healthy meals. (We) could always afford enough to eat but not always healthy meals. Sometimes (we) could not afford enough to eat. Often we could not afford enough to eat.	Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household-- enough of the kinds of food (we) want to eat, enough but not always the kinds of food (we) want to eat, sometimes not enough to eat, or often not enough to eat?
		SS1B	Which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household-- enough of the kinds of food (we) want to eat, enough but not always the kinds of food (we) want to eat, sometimes not enough to eat, or often not enough to eat?	

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS wanted to test a new version of the second screener question SS1. During our expert review, CBSM noted that the phrase “the kinds of food we want to eat” may be problematic because it is ambiguous and may be interpreted to mean “healthy” or “expensive junk food.” The intention of the question is to measure food insufficiency by asking participants to identify whether they can afford enough to eat, including a variety of foods. CBSM proposed a second version be tested as a mini “split ballot,” where half of the cognitive testing participants hear the current instrument version, SS1A during the interview, and then hear the alternative version, SS1B during probing. The other half of participants heard SS1B during the interview and SS1A during probing. SS1A and SS1B can be seen in the table above.

In Rounds 1 and 2, some participants chose different answers for each version, indicating the items are not measuring the same construct. When asked if the questions were asking the same thing, some participants said they felt the two items were the same while others said they were asking different things. We probed participants to see what they think each version is asking, and the predominant theme was that the “kinds” version is asking if they can afford whatever they want to eat that may not necessarily be healthy.

As one participant put it: “[Kinds of food]” just makes a little bit more sense because...we just want to eat the food we want to eat. It doesn't necessarily have to be healthy meals.”

However, participants thought the “healthy” version was asking if they can afford to eat healthy independent of whether that food is what they want to eat or not. Further, throughout the survey the word “healthy” was found to be ambiguous and problematic for participants to consistently define. While we hoped to improve upon SS1A, SS1B was measuring a very different construct and SS1A, the current instrument wording was not difficult for participants to interpret.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommends keeping the current survey wording of “kinds.”

3.3.7 Cutting the Size of Meals and Skipping Meals (SH2)

Table 12 Cutting the Size of Meals and Skipping Meals (SH2)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording/Round 1-3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
SH2	In the last 12 months did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?"

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS was concerned that item SH2 was confusing to participants because it is asking about two different behaviors and therefore may be difficult for participants to know which they are saying “yes” to, “skipping meals” or “cutting the size of your meals.” They also wanted to be sure that participants correctly interpreted the phrase “cutting the size of your meals.” We probed

specifically on this item in Rounds 1 and 2. When probed, participants felt that “cut the size of meals” meant having smaller portions. They were also clear that the question was asking if they had to do this for cost reasons versus voluntary reasons, such as being on a diet to lose weight or feeding an unexpected guest. Several participants indicated they had cut the size of meals for these voluntary reasons, but they all correctly said “no” for this item. Some participants said that “cut the size of meals” meant having small portions and eating just enough to prevent serious hunger. In general, participants did not seem to have any issues with the question asking about both cutting the size and skipping meals. The item seems to be measuring the same underlying theme of eating less food because there is not enough, despite asking about two behaviors. One participant even said cutting the size of meals and skipping an entire meal were the same thing.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommended keeping the current survey wording for SH2.

3.3.8 Low Cost Food for Children (SS5)

Table 13 Low Cost Food for Children (SS5)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording/Round 1-3 Wording/ Final Recommended Wording
SS5	(I/we) relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed (the child/children) in (my/our) household because (I was/we were) running out of money to buy food.

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS wanted to know more about what kind of low-cost food people are feeding children in item SS5. Participants who lived with children were asked about what kind of low-cost food they had used or had heard of people using. The types of food mentioned included hot dogs and rice, ramen, noodles, canned food (such as spaghetti O’s), Peanut Butter and Jelly, cereal, macaroni and cheese, and generic brand frozen foods like pizzas, french fries, fish sticks, and chicken nuggets. Participants also mentioned tactics like buying food in bulk at Costco or buying it at discount stores like Aldi, buying whatever was on sale that week, and buying pre-packaged lunch meat instead of meat from the deli. A major theme among participants’ responses was that processed food is cheaper than fresh food. One participant spontaneously lamented they felt bad they could not afford organic food for their children as they seemed to think it was healthier. For both parents who had used low cost food and those who had not, there was a general sense that low cost food is less healthy, but it is what you have to eat to feel full.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

The current item is working as intended and CBSM does not recommend any changes.

3.4 Section IV Food Program Participation

New introductory text from Feeding America’s survey was added at ERS’s request. This text smoothed the transition from the food-insecurity items to the food program participation items: “Sometimes people need help getting food for their household. There are many programs that can

help.” CBSM agreed the text was an effective transition and lead in to Section IV, it worked well during cognitive testing.

3.4.1 Food Stamp Participation (SP1)

Table 14 Food Stamp Participation (SP1)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording/ Round 1 to 3 Wording/Final Recommended Wording
SP1	In the past 12 months, since December of last year, did (you/anyone in this household) get <State specific program name> or food stamp benefits?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS was considering adding “EBT cards” to the list of benefits in item SP1, but CBSM instead recommended probing on the current item to see if the current terminology is being recognized. The current format fills in the specific state program name based on which state the participant lives in (for DC and VA “SNAP” for MD “Food Supplement Program”) and also mentions “food stamp benefits.” CBSM probed on this question in Rounds 1 and 2 and found that while not many MD participants readily knew what “Food Supplement Program” meant, they were familiar with Food Stamp Benefits. When probed on what they had heard food stamp benefits called there was a split in whether participants knew the benefits as SNAP, food stamps, or EBT. No one who lived in MD readily volunteered “Food Supplement Program” as the more common name. All participants were familiar with food stamp benefits and anyone who was familiar with EBT also knew what either SNAP or Food Stamps were. ERS mentioned a potential complication of using “EBT,” that additional aid for TANF and the Women Infant and Children program can be loaded on EBT cards, which may lead to incorrect “Yes” responses. CBSM therefore did not recommend any changes to this item. The item seemed to work as intended across all three rounds of testing, for both participants who had and had not received food stamp benefits.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendation

CBSM recommended keeping the current survey wording with no modifications.

3.4.2 Free and Reduced Price Breakfast, Lunch, and Snacks (SP6, SP7, NEW 1)

Table 15 Free and Reduced Price Breakfast, Lunch, and Snacks (SP6, SP7, NEW 1)

Item Number	Current Survey Wording	Round 1- 3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SP6	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduced cost lunches at school?	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduced-price lunches at school?	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduced-price lunches at school?
SP7	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduced cost breakfasts at school?	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduced-price breakfasts at school?	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive free or reduce- price breakfasts at school?
NEW 1	New item	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive a free or reduced-price meal or snack at an afterschool program or daycare?	During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive a free or reduced-price meal or snack at an afterschool program or daycare?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

ERS requested that the questions about “free and reduced-cost breakfast” SP7 and “lunch” SP6 be changed respectively to “free and reduced-price breakfast” and “free and reduced-price lunch.” Given this language is consistent with how the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), who oversees the program, refers to the free and reduced-price lunch and breakfast program, CBSM agreed with this change. There was no issue with this change across all three rounds of testing.

ERS expressed concern that the current item, SP7, which asks about free and reduced-price breakfast may not be capturing a new program in which children were fed breakfast on the bus rather than literally at school. Rather than changing the item and possibly introducing confusion for most participants who are not enrolled in such programs, we instead asked during probing if they would include free or reduce price breakfast that was given on the way to school. Participants were confused by the idea that kids could receive breakfast on the bus. They were unable to answer the probe because they imagined the only way kids would get breakfast on the bus is if parents sent something with the child. After one round, ERS agreed to stop probing on the breakfast on the bus program and decided to not further modify item SP6.

A new item, NEW1, was added at ERS’s request to *Section IV* which asked if any children between 5-18 years old had received a free or reduced-price snack at an afterschool program or daycare. This question was added immediately after the questions about “free and reduced-price breakfast/lunch” for 5-18-year-old children, and right before item SP7A which asks about free and reduced-price food for children 6 years and under. The new item, NEW1, was intended to capture free or reduced-price food availability for school-age children as part of an afterschool program. During cognitive testing, no participants had children who had ever received any kind of free or reduced-price food at an afterschool program. Several participants seemed to mistakenly think this question was asking about kids age 6 and under who are in daycare.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommended incorporating the word “price” instead of “cost” into SP6 and SP7 because this wording worked well during cognitive testing and it is consistent with the terminology used by the program.

CBSM recommended dropping the words “or daycare” from NEW 1 to make it clearer it was asking about after care for school-age children. The new item read, “During the past 30 days, did any children in the household (between 5 and 18 years old) receive a free or reduced-price meal or snack at an afterschool program?”

3.5 Section V Community Food Assistance

ERS requested substantial changes be tested in *Section V on Community Food Assistance* because the data from these questions on food assistance program use have not been consistent with that of other organizations that collect similar data. Given this discrepancy, ERS wanted to test questions that were similar to those used by other organizations, particularly Feeding America. During data collection, *Section V* is only asked of participants who indicate food insecurity in the preceding questions or meet certain income guidelines. In order to test the new question wording and how it was being interpreted, *Section V* was administered to all 30 participants and only age restrictions were used to determine which questions were asked. The new items were tested in a split ballot format, in which half of cognitive interview participants received one version during the interview and then the other version during probing, and the other half of participants received the opposite order for the versions.

3.5.1 Senior Free Meal Programs (SC1, SC2)

Table 16 Senior Free Meal Programs (SC1, SC2)

Item number	Current Instrument Wording/Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SC1 and SC2	SC1: During the past 30 days, did (you/anyone in this household) receive any meals delivered to the home from community programs, “Meals on wheels,” or any other programs? SC2: During the past 30 days, did (you/anyone in this household) go to a community program or senior center to eat prepared meals? [Only asked if HHD has someone 60 or older]	These items will be replaced by the NEW 3 item that is asked of everyone who receives Section V, regardless of age.

Round 1 to 3 Findings

During cognitive testing, *Section V* began with SC1 and SC2 which ask about receiving free prepared meals; these questions are only asked if the household has a member 60 or older.

In Rounds 1 to 3, eleven participants had a household member 60 or older and were asked these two questions. While these items were easily understood during testing, the questions were replaced by the NEW 3 item below that asks about free meals or food obtained by any household

member, regardless of age. This was done to reduce the burden and repetitiveness of the survey while also more accurately capturing the usage of these programs across all age groups.

Recommendations

ERS decided to replace items SC3 and SC4 with the NEW 3 6.5.3. CBSM agreed with this decision since the new items worked well for participants 60 and over and encompass more people who may be utilizing these programs.

3.5.2 Emergency Food vs. Free Groceries (SC3, SC3A)

Table 17 Emergency Food vs. Free Groceries (SC3, SC3A)

Item Number	Current Instrument Wording	Round 1 and 2 Wording	Item Number	Round 3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SC3	In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever get emergency food from a church, a food pantry, food bank, or other place that helps with free food?	During the past 12 months, have you or anyone in your household gotten free groceries from a food pantry, food bank, church, or other place that helps with free food?	SC3-Free Groceries	During the past 12 months, did you or other adults ever get free groceries from a food pantry, food bank, church, or other place that helps with free food?	In the last 12 months, have you or anyone in your household ever gotten free groceries from a food pantry, food bank, church, or other place that helps with free food?
		In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever get emergency food from a church, a food pantry, food bank, or other place that helps with free food?	SC3-Emergency Food	In the last 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever get emergency food from a food pantry, food bank, church or other place that helps with free food?	N/A
SC3A	Is there a church, food pantry, food bank or other place in your community where you could get emergency food if you needed it?	Is there a food pantry, food bank, church or other place in your community where you could get free groceries if you needed it?	SC3A-Free Groceries	Is there a food pantry, food bank, church or other place in your community where you could get free groceries if you needed it?	Is there a food pantry, food bank, church, or other place in your community where you could get free groceries if you needed it?
		Is there a church, food pantry, food bank or other place in your community where you could get emergency food if you needed it?	SC3A-Emergency Food	Is there a food pantry, food bank, church or other place in your community where you could get emergency food if you needed it?"	N/A

Round 1 to 2 Findings

All participants in Rounds 1 and 2 were asked both the current instrument wording, SC3 & SC3A-emergency food and the new proposed wordings, SC3 and SC3A-free groceries. The order was randomized so half of participants received the current instrument wording during the interview and the new proposed wording during probing and the other half received the opposite order.

The difference most participants noticed between the two versions was the use of the phrase “free groceries” versus the phrase “emergency food”. Participants were almost evenly split on which version they preferred. One participant who preferred “free groceries” said it was “more hip, more regular, less dramatic”. Conversely, another participant said “emergency food” is a phrase used by people facing food shortages use, as it is a true emergency. One participant said “no” to SC3-emergency food but then said “yes” to SC3-free groceries because they specifically said the phrase “emergency food” was too dramatic.

Another participant in Round 1 spontaneously noticed the difference between the phrases “you or other adults in your household” versus “you or anyone in your household.” To her these were different, as the former included homeless people you let sleep on your couch or let use your address for food stamps. She mentioned that she had let other adults sleep on her couch in the past and at one point slept on other people’s couches. She preferred a question that combined “you or other adults in your household” with emergency food.

Round 1 and 2 Recommendations

CBSM recommended using the new proposed wording of “free groceries” for both questions during Round 3 of cognitive testing and only asking about “emergency food” during probing. “Free groceries” seemed to be more inclusive and participants were more likely to use it. CBSM also recommended the order of places in the emergency food version be re-ordered to match the free groceries version. The verb in the free groceries version was changed to “did” instead of “have” so the versions were consistent. CBSM also recommended changing the free groceries version to “you or other adults in your household,” as this was consistent with the emergency food version.

Round 3 Findings

Starting in Round 3, every participant was asked the free groceries version during the interview and the emergency food version was only asked during probing.

Two participants said “yes” to the free groceries version and then “no” to the emergency food version. Both said they saw “free groceries” as more of a regular routine thing they did as opposed to a dire situation where you need food on a sudden and temporary basis. Other participants agreed that “free groceries” conveys less urgency to get food:

“We don't get emergency food, just food we get every single month to help out if we need it. We go most months.”

For this round, probing questions focused less on participant preference and more on their interpretations of the difference between “free groceries” and “emergency food.” It appears that these two terms are measuring different constructs, with “free groceries” being interpreted more broadly and participants being more likely to say that they received free groceries.

Round 3 Recommendations

We recommend the new proposed wording that utilizes “free groceries.” In addition to being consistent with what other surveys use, this item was easily understood and interpreted to mean anyone who received “free groceries” as opposed to only people who needed groceries on an emergency basis. Using terminology that is more inclusive may help bring the reported program usage in line with other surveys.

ERS requested that SC3 revert to the “you or anyone in your household” language instead of “you or other adults.” This change was made was for consistency with the question asked by Feed America, which is trying to capture teens and children who may receive free groceries through their school to bring home in a backpack or other similar programs.

3.5.3 Free Meal Program Usage (SC4)

Table 18 Free Meal Program Usage (SC4)

Item Number	Current Instrument Wording	Item Number	Round 1 to 3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
SC4	In the last 12 months, did (you or other adults in your household) ever eat any meals at a soup kitchen or shelter?	SC4-Free meals	During the past 12 months, have you or anyone in your household received a free meal from a church, shelter, home-delivered meal service like Meals on Wheels, or other place that helps with free meals?	In the last 12 months, have you or anyone in your household received a free meal from a church, shelter, home-delivered meal service like Meals on Wheels, or other place that helps with free meals?
		SC4-Soup Kitchen	In the last 12 months, did (you or other adults in your household) ever eat any meals at a soup kitchen or shelter?	

Round 1 to 3 Findings

The order was randomized for all three rounds so half of participants received the current instrument wording, SC4- soup kitchen, during the interview and the other half received the new proposed wording SC4-free meals during probing. The other half of participants heard SC4-free meals during the interview and then SC4-soup kitchen during probing.

The majority of participants said that SC4A- free meal version was broader, less dire, and they thought more people would say “yes” to it. One participant said:

“I’m gonna say, like 'soup kitchens' or 'shelters' means really a lot of homeless people usually go to soup kitchens and shelters. The first [version about free meal] is, say, like a home delivery meal

service, maybe for people like senior citizens, who can't go out grocery shopping. And a free meal from a Church is if like they have a free event or concert or a community day, they may have meals for the community ... Those are definitely two different scenarios."

Multiple participants also said it was good it included more options like "Meals on Wheels." Several participants said that the term "soup kitchen," is not as commonly used anymore but everyone was familiar with the term. Participants easily interpreted both versions, but SC4 -free meal version appears to encompass more situations and ways in which people can obtain a free meal.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommends replacing the current SC4- soup kitchen with the SC4-free meal version. In addition to being easily understood by participants, the wording in SC4-free meal is more inclusive than SC4- soup kitchen. It implies a "less dire" situation in which someone would obtain a free meal and lists more options for the types of places a person could get a free meal.

3.5.4 Free Meal Program Community Availability (NEW 4)

Table 19 Free Meal Program Community Availability (NEW 4)

Item Number	Current Instrument Wording	Proposed New Wording/ Round 1-3 Wording	Final Recommended Wording
NEW4	N/A	Is there a church, shelter, home-delivery meal service like meals on Wheels, or other place in your community where you could get free meals if you needed it?	Is there a church, shelter, home-delivery meal service like meals on Wheels, or other place in your community where you could get free meals if you needed it?

Round 1 to 3 Findings

Item NEW 4 was the last item asked in the survey and has no existing counterpart in the current survey. Participants across all three rounds easily understood this item as intended. Many said they were unsure if there was a free meal program in their community.

In Rounds 2 and 3, a probe was added to see if participants could see the difference between this item and SC 3A, which asks if there is a program to provide free groceries in their community. When probed about the difference, most participants said that a "free meal" is something that is already prepared whereas "free groceries" is something that they would have to cook or prepare themselves.

Round 1 to 3 Recommendations

CBSM recommends adding this question to the survey as it was easily understood across three rounds of testing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, results from cognitive testing showed that the CPS FSS appears to be working well for the majority of participants. The changes made to Section I were easily understood and should help better reflect current shopping behaviors of participants than the previous question wording. Switching *Sections III* and *IV* was not problematic for the flow of the survey or participants' understanding of the questions. The new items in *Section V* encompassed more food assistance programs than the current survey wording and this was reiterated by participants who agreed the new items were “less dire” and had more options.

All recommended changes to the FSS survey will be pretested in a split panel test in the CPS in 2020. Pending the results of the split panel test and upon approval, a final revised survey instrument will be implemented in a future CPS-FSS collection.

5. REFERENCES

USDA Food and Nutrition Service (2020). Fiscal Year 2019 Year End Summary. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Retrieved from: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019-SNAP-Retailer-Management-Year-End-Summary.pdf>.