

# Targeted benefits and dietary choices: Evidence from Healthy Start

Rachel Griffith

University of Manchester, Institute for Fiscal Studies

Stephanie von Hinke

University of Bristol, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Institute for Fiscal Studies

Sarah Smith

University of Bristol, Institute for Fiscal Studies

2 December 2020

# Background

Rising obesity and poor diets are a growing policy concern

- ▶ Policy makers have tried many ways to improve diet quality

The Healthy Start Scheme

- ▶ Large-scale, nationally-implemented scheme that aimed to increase F&V

We investigate:

- ▶ Did the scheme affect food purchases and dietary intake?
- ▶ The mechanism

# Healthy Start Scheme

Introduced in November 2006

Vouchers for low-income families (children < 4) and pregnant women

- ▶ Spend on plain fresh fruit and veg, cow's milk and infant formula

HS01  
APRIL 2010 EDITION

## Free milk, fruit, veg and vitamins for you and your family

For me  
VOUCHER  
Andre  
Don't I get any?

To apply please see the form inside  
[www.healthystart.nhs.uk](http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk)

### HEALTHY START

DHSSPS  
 NHS GIG  
 healthier scotland  
 NHS

# Healthy Start Scheme



Approx £3.00 per voucher p/w

- ▶ One voucher per child; two for children aged 0-1
- ▶ Vouchers sent monthly; valid only for that month

# Findings (1)

We use supermarket scanner data to estimate the overall effect of the Scheme, focusing on low-income families (i.e. those on benefits). We compare:

- ▶ Spending on F&V among those eligible vs not eligible
- ▶ Spending on F&V for both groups before vs after Nov 2006

Spending:

- ▶ The eligible increased F&V spending by 15% compared to those ineligible
- ▶ This is similar to £2.43 extra spent on F&V per household per month
- ▶ Or 1.8kg

Nutritional choices:

- ▶ An increase in fibre, beta-carotene, carbs, iron, potassium and zinc
- ▶ No evidence of any increase in (added) sugars, (saturated) fats, or salt

## Findings (2)

Mechanism behind the effect

- ▶ Economic incentives: increase in budget for F&V
- ▶ Behavioural: *labelling* of the vouchers

We explore this by looking at two groups of voucher recipients:

- ▶ Those who spent *more* than the voucher on F&V before Nov06
- ▶ Those who spent *less* than the voucher on F&V before Nov06

The increase in spending is driven by the latter group

- ▶ No change in spending among those in the first group
- ▶ But also no increase in other spending

# Discussion

Two substantive contributions to the debate on improving dietary choice

- ▶ Targeted benefits are effective in increasing F&V consumption
- ▶ They worked through economic incentives

The Healthy Start Scheme

- ▶ Scheme cost £100m; 0.5m recipients
- ▶ Worked on half of recipients; 1 portion p/d
- ▶ Group most in need of increasing fruit and veg consumption?

Policy implications; highlight 2 characteristics of the Scheme

- ▶ Value: Reach more households with higher value vouchers
- ▶ Coverage: Change food basket by better targeting of foods

Thank you

S.vonHinke@bristol.ac.uk