

SNAP Online Grocery Delivery in California: Access Gaps During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Online Purchasing Pilot (OPP) expanded across the US. This program, enabling direct-to-home grocery delivery, could be a transformative step towards improving fresh food access, particularly for elderly, disabled, or immunocompromised individuals, and those in food apartheid areas. However, lack of information on which areas are serviced by SNAP OPP hinders the identification of potential demographic and regional disparities in access. Lessons from the initial implementation period are critical for understanding continuing inequities and informing the implementation of future programs.

Methods

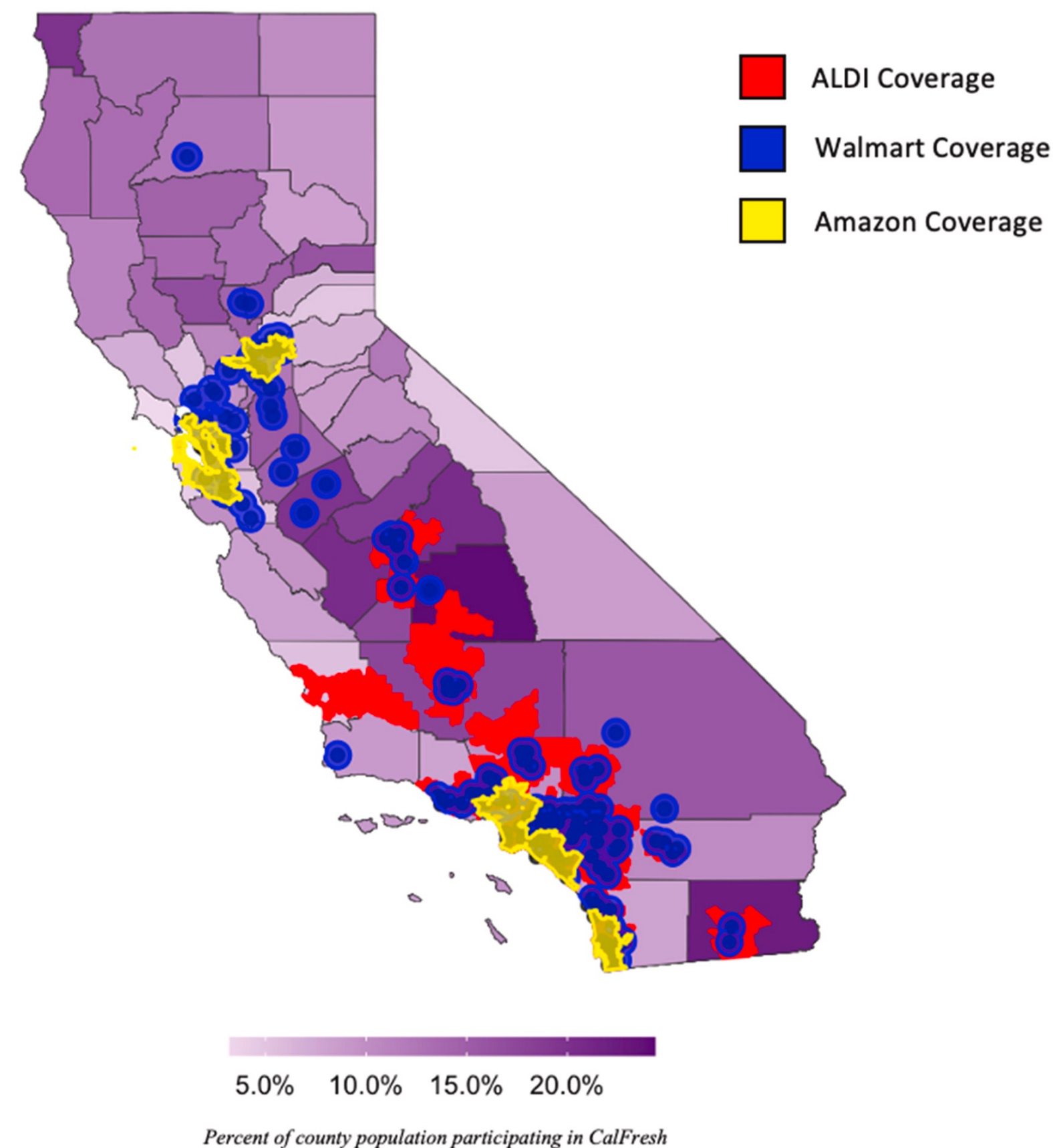
“Coverage” refers to the regions in which perishable goods could be ordered online for delivery using SNAP EBT. The study period was fall of 2020 through early winter of 2021. Chi-squared tests were performed for a descriptive analysis and OLS linear regressions were used to model associations between SNAP OPP coverage and COVID case rates and limited food access areas. Shapefiles representing the delivery regions of Walmart, ALDI, and Amazon were overlapped to find the combined spatial coverage of the SNAP OPP of all three retailers. Five-year estimates for county-level population count and the number of CalFresh households in California were extracted from the U.S. Census’ 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). Using area-weighted interpolation of the delivery shapefiles and estimates of CalFresh household counts, the approximate total number of CalFresh households covered in each census block group was calculated; it was assumed that CalFresh households were equally distributed across census block groups.

Results

47% of all California SNAP participants lived in low-income, low-access areas (LILA areas - or “food apartheid”). 28% of all urban census tracts, and 40% of all rural census tracts, were LILA areas. 86% CA SNAP recipients were covered by SNAP OPP delivery, but 1/5 of those with access to the program were only covered by 1 of the 3 retailers. SNAP OPP delivery covered 87% of urban residents. Only 30% of SNAP households in rural LILAs were covered.

Mapping Access

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Online Purchasing Pilot (OPP) Coverage and Percent of CalFresh Households



Implications

SNAP OPP delivery has the potential to, and already may, expand food security and fresh produce access in urban areas, especially in LILA areas, as delivery coverage is robust. Most rural regions, however, lack SNAP OPP delivery access. The American Rescue Plan Act allocated \$25 million to improving SNAP online, and \$20 million remains unspent. In order to equitably expand SNAP OPP and leverage the program to reduce food insecurity in rural areas and empower small businesses, the USDA should spend the additional funds on grants that specifically support rural retailers and residents, allow more third-party processors to accept SNAP online, and fund innovative distribution and delivery pilots.

Acknowledgements

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References

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