



Assessing New Approaches to CalFresh

Results from a Survey of CalFresh Participants and Eligible Households

Conducted for
California Food Policy Advocates

With funding from
The California Endowment

By
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Introduction

California Food Policy Advocates commissioned PerryUndem Research/Communication to conduct a statewide survey on issues relating to CalFresh, including food purchases, beverage consumption, benefit levels, and allowable purchases. The survey was designed to understand perceptions of CalFresh and to solicit input on efforts aimed at supporting health and healthy eating through CalFresh. The survey was conducted among a difficult to reach population of households currently participating in CalFresh as well as households that are likely income-eligible for CalFresh but not currently participating. In total, the study consisted of 617 households – with 406 households that are currently participating in CalFresh and 211 households that are likely income-eligible for CalFresh (gross household income <130% FPL) but not currently participating.¹ The survey was fielded from April 25 to May 28, 2014.

Summary of Findings

The results show that surveyed CalFresh participants and eligible² households strongly support efforts to limit the kinds of beverages that can be purchased with CalFresh benefits. Supporting this change in allowable CalFresh purchases may seem counter-intuitive, particularly among CalFresh participants and eligible non-participants. However, factors identified by respondents over the course of this survey – such as a widespread understanding of the negative health outcomes tied to the consumption of sugary beverages, the desire to limit their children’s consumption of these beverages, and the goal of leading healthier lives – could help explain this position.

Though many surveyed households consume sugary beverages – defined as drinks that have added caloric sweeteners – respondents are open to efforts that would change allowable CalFresh purchases when it comes to such beverages. Additionally, the study findings suggest that changes to allowable purchases and benefit levels, as described in the survey, would not hurt the high standing of CalFresh among participants and eligible households – or decrease interest in applying for benefits.

Key survey results include:

- More than 6 in 10 CalFresh participants and eligible households (61%) support making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only drinks that can be purchased with CalFresh benefits.
- Seventy percent of CalFresh participants and eligible households are aware of local, state, or national efforts to reduce access to sugary drinks. More than 6 in 10 (68%) support these efforts.

¹ The survey was administered online using GfK’s KnowledgePanel, a probability-based web panel, as well as sample from an additional opt-in online sample. Both samples were then blended using KnowledgePanel Calibration. The survey consisted of n=617 households, including n=406 current CalFresh households and n=211 households that are likely income-eligible for CalFresh (gross household income <130%FPL) but not currently participating. The margin of error was 7.3 percentage points for the total sample; 9.6 percentage points for the CalFresh households; and 10.7 percentage points for the likely income-eligible households not currently participating in CalFresh.

² Throughout the report, “likely income-eligible households” will be referred to as “eligible households.”

- Nearly 2 in 3 CalFresh participants and eligible households (65%) support a proposal that would give CalFresh participants additional monthly benefits if unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits.
- More than 8 in 10 eligible households that do not currently participate in CalFresh say their interest in applying for CalFresh would increase (28%) or be unchanged (57%) by the programmatic changes described above. Only 13% say the changes would make them less interested in applying.
- Among CalFresh participants, 55% say they would consume fewer sugary drinks if unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits.
- More than 8 in 10 CalFresh participants and eligible households (81%) say sugary drinks are bad for one's health. Nearly 9 in 10 (87%) believe there is a link between weight gain or obesity and sugary drinks. Furthermore, 80% believe there is a link between diabetes and sugary drinks.
- When asked about beverages containing added caloric or non-caloric sweeteners (i.e., beverages other than unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water), nearly 9 in 10 respondents with children (86%) believe it is important to limit how much their children consume.
- CalFresh has a solid standing among participants and eligible households as nearly 7 in 10 (68%) feel positively about the program. Additionally, 45% think the program helps people eat healthfully, while another 43% are neutral on this point.

Detailed Findings

Background

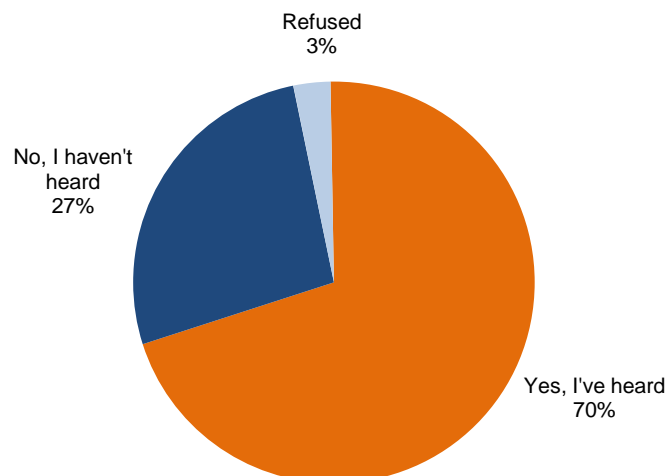
From the reduction of sweetened beverages in schools to proposed warning labels for soda, California lawmakers have a history of advancing efforts to reduce access to (and consumption of) beverages that are linked to negative health outcomes such as obesity, dental caries, and diabetes. In recent years, policymakers across the country have debated changes to CalFresh (known federally as SNAP – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), including the implementation of new purchasing rules to reduce access to unhealthful foods and benefit incentives to increase consumption of healthful foods. Largely missing from these debates are the voices and perspectives of CalFresh participants and eligible households. This research aims to assess attitudes and behaviors among CalFresh participants and eligible households with respect to food purchases, beverage consumption, diet-related health outcomes, and potential changes to benefit levels and allowable purchases within CalFresh.

Support for Revising Allowable Beverage Purchases

Systemic efforts to reduce the consumption of sugary drinks – defined as drinks that have added caloric sweeteners – have been the subject of substantial public discourse and media coverage over the past several years. This survey shows that those discussions are affecting CalFresh participants and eligible households.

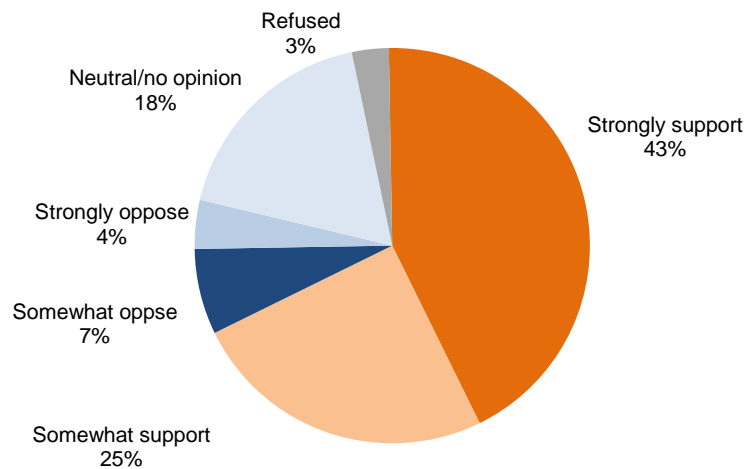
Seven in 10 CalFresh enrollees and eligible households (70%) say they have heard of community, state, or nationwide efforts to reduce access to sugary drinks, including “removing soda from vending machines at schools, putting a tax on sugary drinks, limiting the sale of extra-large sugary drinks, or putting a warning label on sodas.” [Figure 1]

Figure 1: Have you heard about efforts to reduce access to sugary drinks in your community across the state, or nationwide? These could include removing soda from vending machines at schools, putting a tax on sugary drinks, limiting the sale of extra-large sugary drinks, or putting a warning label on sodas.
n=617



Support is high for “efforts to reduce access to sugary drinks so fewer people drink them.” Among CalFresh participants and eligible households, 68% say they are in favor of such efforts – with 43% expressing strong support. Another 1 in 5 households (18%) are neutral on the issue and only 11% oppose these efforts to some degree. [Figure 2] These results indicate a strong baseline of support for future efforts to reduce access to – and consumption of – sugary drinks.

Figure 2: Do you support or oppose efforts to reduce access to sugary drinks so that fewer people drink them?
n=617



Respondents were presented with a description (below) of potential changes to allowable purchases within CalFresh.

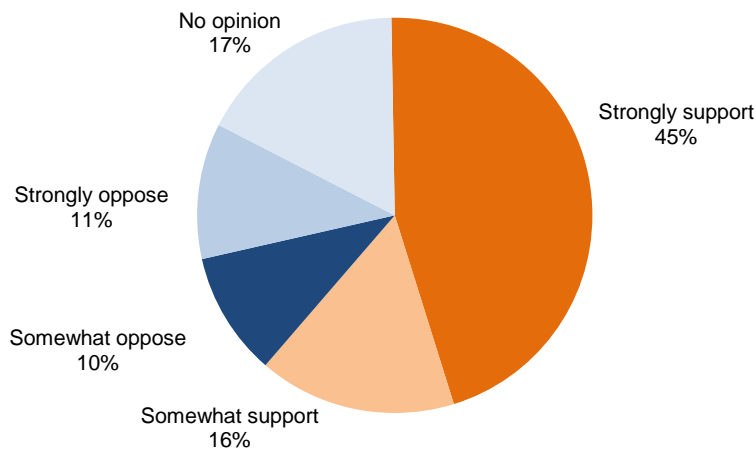
Allowable Purchases within CalFresh: Types of Beverages

Lawmakers are interested in the types of drinks that people buy with CalFresh benefits, and some are concerned about benefits being used to buy sugary drinks. (Right now, CalFresh participants can use benefits to purchase most foods or beverages, but not alcohol or hot food).

Some lawmakers want to limit the types of drinks that can be purchased with CalFresh benefits. One idea is to make certain beverages (unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water) the only drinks that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits. (Please note: baby formula would still be an allowable beverage).

More than 6 in 10 CalFresh participants and eligible households (61%) support making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that can be purchased with CalFresh benefits. Forty-five percent of respondents characterize their support for this proposal as “strong.” Another 17% of households have no opinion about the proposed change and only 1 in 5 (21%) oppose these efforts to some extent. [Figure 3]

Figure 3: Do you support or oppose making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only drinks that can be bought with CalFresh benefits?
n=617



Respondents were asked to articulate why they support or oppose the proposed change to make unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits. Supporters overwhelmingly cite the health concerns associated with sugary beverages as the basis for their position. In contrast, respondents that oppose the proposal say that such a change “limits free choice” or that the government should not have a role in deciding what people eat or drink.

Despite some opposition, the study shows majority support for modifications that would make unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits.

Two Options for CalFresh Participation

CalFresh participants and eligible households were asked if they would support or oppose a proposal that would give people the two options described below.

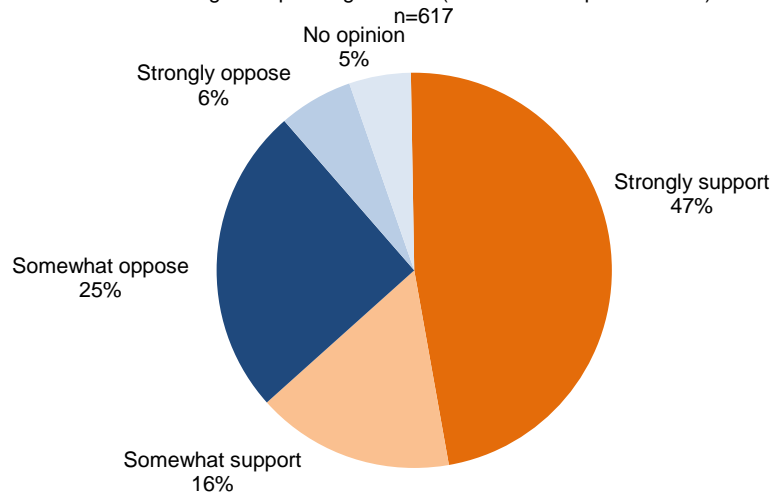
1. Receive CalFresh benefits with no changes to benefit levels or allowable purchases.

OR

2. Receive additional monthly benefits if unflavored milk, 100%, and plain water were the only drinks that could be purchased with CalFresh.

By a 63 to 31% margin, respondents support the proposal to provide CalFresh participants with two options for program participation. Nearly half of respondents (47%) “strongly support” the change. In contrast, only 6% strongly oppose offering the two options. Another 25% report being somewhat opposed. [Figure 4]

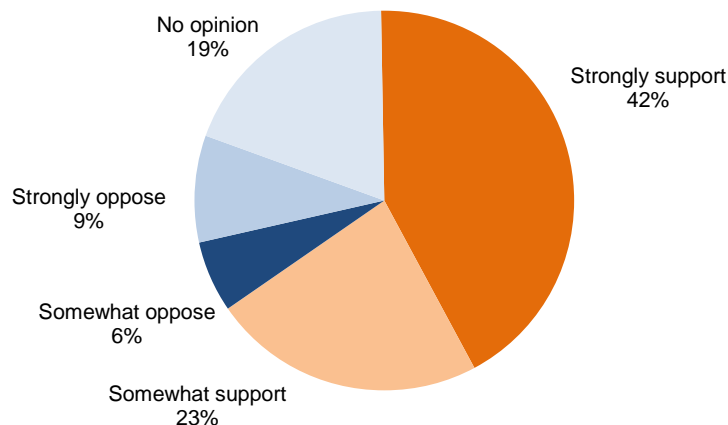
Figure 4: Do you support or oppose giving CalFresh participants two options for receiving and spending benefits? (See detailed options above)



Pairing Incentives with New Purchasing Rules

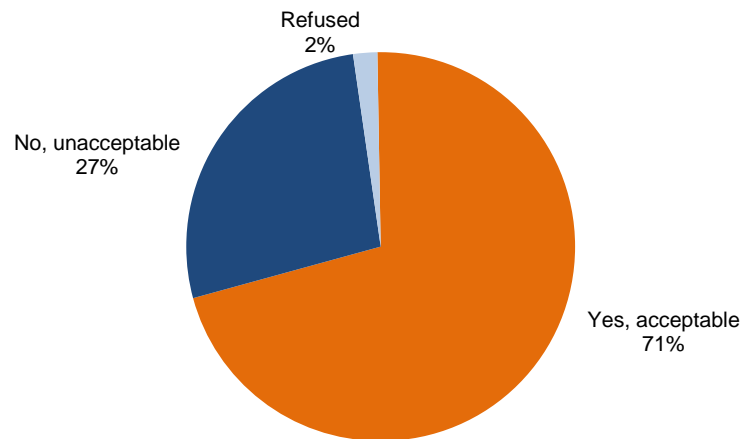
Nearly 2 in 3 CalFresh participants and eligible households (65%) support a proposal that would give CalFresh participants additional monthly benefits if unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits. Notably, 42% of respondents “strongly support” the idea. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents (19%) have no opinion on the issue and only 15% express some level of opposition to the change. [Figure 5]

Figure 5: Do you support or oppose the idea of making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only drinks that can be bought with CalFresh benefits if CalFresh participants also receive extra benefits each month?



CalFresh participants and eligible households were asked whether \$15 or \$30 in additional monthly benefits would be acceptable given the changes to allowable beverage purchases described above. (Half of the sample was asked whether \$15 would be an acceptable amount. The other half was asked whether \$30 would be an acceptable amount.) More than 7 in 10 say this adjustment is acceptable; only 27% disagree. There was no substantive difference in responses based on the specified amount of additional benefits. [Figure 6]

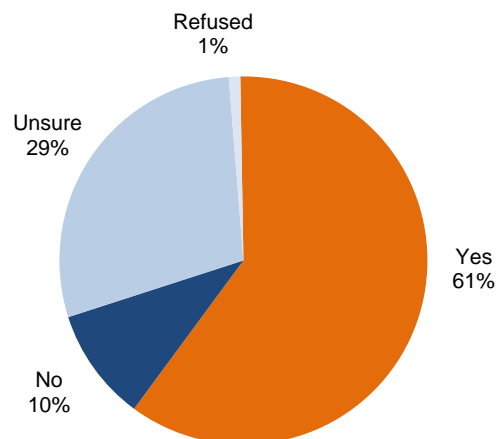
Figure 6: Think about CalFresh participants who would choose to get extra benefits and the only drinks they could purchase with CalFresh would be unflavored milk, 100% juice, and/or plain water. If those CalFresh participants received \$15/\$30 in extra benefits each month, would that be an acceptable amount of extra benefits?
n=617



Support for Testing Changes to CalFresh

When asked whether they would be willing to participate in a project that would test the idea of pairing incentives with new purchasing rules (i.e., providing additional monthly benefits and making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh), more than 6 in 10 CalFresh participants (61%) say yes. Another 29% are unsure about their willingness to participate in such a project and only 10% say they would not be willing to participate. This suggests that support for a pilot/demonstration project is high among CalFresh participants. Households are open to testing program changes. [Figure 7]

Figure 7: (CalFresh participants only) The state of California may want to test the idea of making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only drinks that can be bought with CalFresh benefits. Participants who agree to be part of this test project could get extra monthly benefits. If your county is chosen as one of the test locations, would you be willing to participate in such a project?
n=406



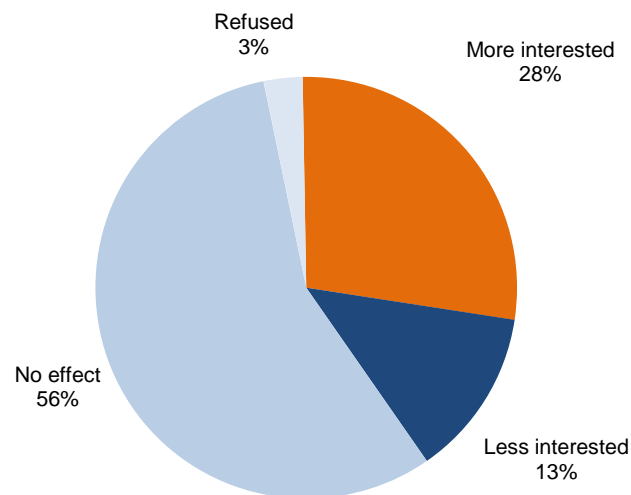
The Impact of Potential Changes to CalFresh

The survey indicates that CalFresh participants and eligible households would be positively affected by the pairing of incentives and allowable purchases described above.

The Impact of New Purchasing Rules on CalFresh Enrollment

Nearly 30% of respondents who do not currently receive CalFresh benefits (i.e., eligible, non-participating households) say that making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that could be purchased with CalFresh would increase their interest in applying for the program. For 57%, the change to allowable purchases would have no effect on their interest in applying for benefits. In contrast, only 13% say the change would make them less interested in applying for CalFresh [Figure 8].

Figure 8: (Non-CalFresh participants only) If unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only drinks you could buy with CalFresh benefits, how would this change your interest in applying for CalFresh?
n=211

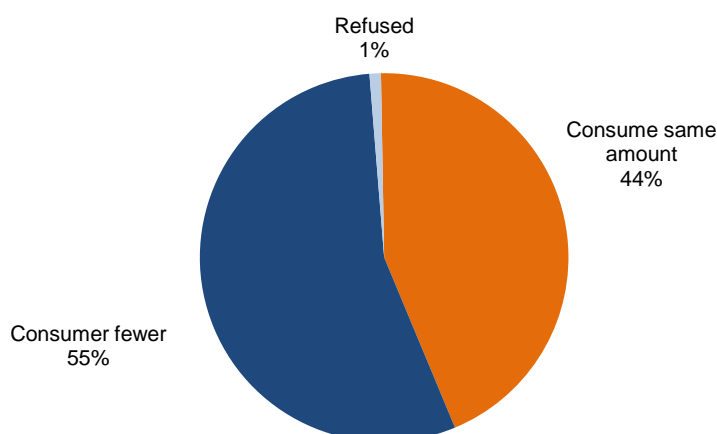


The Impact of New Purchasing Rules on Beverage Consumption

A 55% majority of respondents who currently participate in CalFresh say they would consume fewer sugary drinks if unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only drinks that could be purchased with CalFresh benefits. Forty-four percent say they would drink the same amount of sugary beverages. [Figure 9]

Although a large share of respondents believe that new purchasing rules for beverages within CalFresh would not affect their consumption of sugary drinks, most households anticipate making healthier choices.

Figure 9: (CalFresh participants only) If unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water were the only drinks that you could buy with CalFresh, how would that change the amount of sugary drinks – like regular soda, sweet iced tea, or chocolate milk – your household consumes?
n=406



The Impact of New Purchasing Rules on Grocery Expenditures

Current CalFresh participants were asked what they would buy if the CalFresh benefits they currently spend on beverages other than unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water had to be used on other types of groceries. More than 1 in 3 (34%) say they would buy more fruits, vegetables, meats, or other proteins.

Beverage Consumption & Knowledge of Diet-Related Health Outcomes

Support for changes to allowable beverage purchases within CalFresh is not altogether surprising given the context in which people view sweetened, flavored, and sugary drinks.³ Among those surveyed, there is near universal consensus that sugary drinks are bad for people's health.

A substantial 8 in 10 majority of surveyed CalFresh participants and eligible households (81%) say sugary drinks are bad for one's health. Nearly 9 in 10 respondents (87%) believe there is a link between weight gain/obesity and sugary drinks. Eighty percent of surveyed CalFresh participants and eligible households also believe there is a link between diabetes and sugary drinks. [Table 1]

Additionally, nearly 9 in 10 households (88%) believe that regular (non-diet) soda is unhealthy. [Appendix 1]

Given this knowledge, it makes sense that most respondents with children (86%) believe it is important to limit the amount of flavored/sweetened beverages that their children drink.

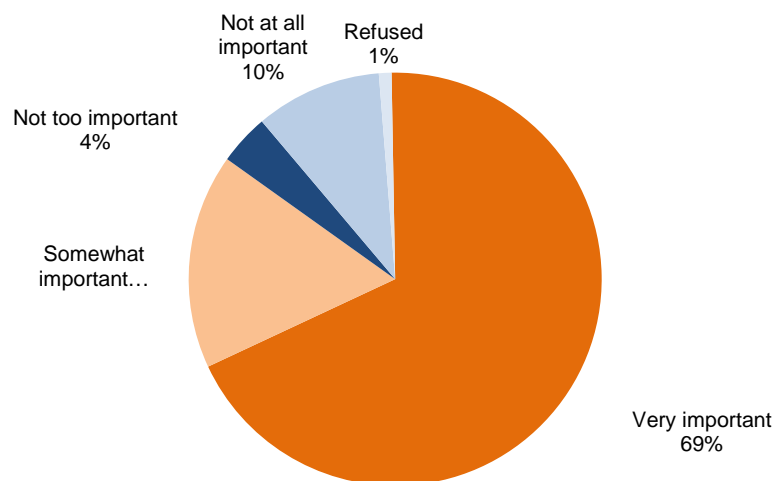
³ For the purposes of the survey

- "Sweetened/flavored" drinks were defined as beverages containing added caloric or non-caloric sweeteners.
- "Sugary" drinks were defined as beverages containing added caloric sweeteners (e.g., sugar, high-fructose corn syrup).

Note: “flavored/sweetened” beverages are those containing added caloric or non-caloric sweeteners. [Figure 10]

Table 1: Health and Sugary Drinks	Yes	No	Don't know
As far as you know, are sugary drinks (defined as drinks that have added caloric sweeteners) bad for your health?	81%	3%	14%
As far as you know, is there a link between weight gain/obesity and sugary drinks?	87%	1%	11%
As far as you know, is there a link between sugary drinks and diabetes?	80%	4%	15%

Figure 10: (If children in the household) How important is it to limit the amount of flavored/sweetened drinks that your children drink?
n=327



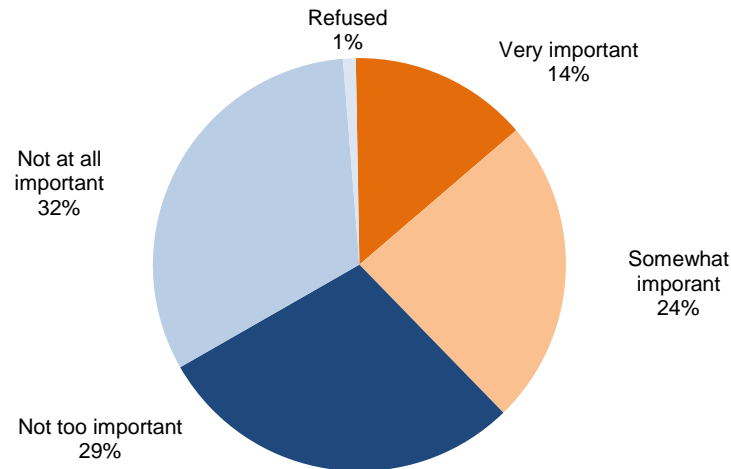
Despite an understanding of the negative health outcomes linked to consuming sugary beverages, more than 4 in 10 respondents (41%) say they drink regular (non-diet) soda at least once a week. Twenty percent say they drink regular (non-diet) soda at least 3 times a week [Appendix 2].

Nearly 4 in 10 respondents (39%) say they have a sweetened iced tea or coffee drink at least once a week. Nearly 6 in 10 respondents (58%) consider such drinks unhealthy.

Just over 30% of respondents report having sports drinks (32%) and juice drinks⁴ (31%) at least once a week. Thirty-five percent of respondents consider sports drinks unhealthy while 58% consider juice drinks unhealthy.

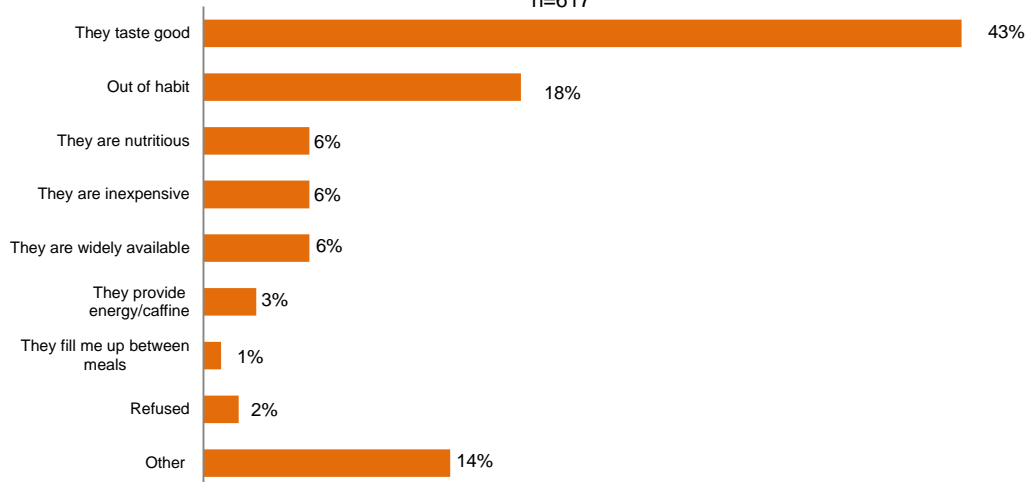
Nearly 4 in 10 respondents (38%) say it is “very” or “somewhat” important for them or others in their household to have flavored/sweetened drinks. [Figure 11]

Figure 11: How important is it for you or other people in your home (like your children, spouse, or partner) to have flavored and/or sweetened drinks?
n=617



Respondents were asked to identify the primary reason why they consume flavored/sweetened drinks (i.e. drinks with added caloric or non-caloric sweeteners). More than 4 in 10 respondents (43%) cite taste as the primary reason while nearly 20% report that habit is the primary influence. [Figure 12]

Figure 12: What is the main reason you drink flavored/sweetened drinks?
n=617



The survey findings show that respondents recognize the negative health consequences linked to drinking sugary beverages. Respondents’ consumption of these beverages

⁴ Drinks with less than 100% fruit juice (e.g., Capri Sun or Hi-C)

continues despite this understanding. The disconnect between health knowledge and health behaviors indicates that systemic efforts to reduce the consumption of sugary beverages are needed. Testing changes to CalFresh to confirm whether the program can contribute to those systematic efforts is an important step forward.

Positive Perceptions of CalFresh

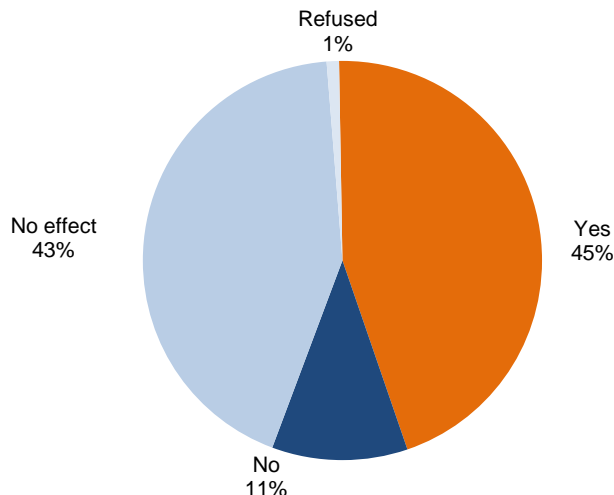
Respondents were asked about their general impressions of CalFresh. Survey findings show the program is in strong standing. Among CalFresh participants and eligible households, nearly 7 in 10 (68%) feel positively about the program. Another 1 in 5 (21%) are neutral. Only 12% of those surveyed feel negatively about CalFresh. [Table 2]

Table 2: Based on what you know about CalFresh, do you feel positive or negative about the program? n=617	Total
10 – Very Positive	35%
9	9%
8	11%
7	6%
6	7%
5- Neutral	21%
4	4%
3	0%
2	3%
1	1%
0 – Very negative	4%
10-6 – Positive	68%
5 – Neutral	21%
4-0 - Negative	12%

Among those respondents who are CalFresh participants, views of the program are even more positive as 85% have a favorable opinion of the program – with more than 1 in 2 (52%) having a very positive opinion.

When asked whether they think CalFresh helps people eat healthier, 45% of households say yes while 43% say it has no effect on the nutritional quality of participants' diets. Just 11% of households think CalFresh does not help people eat healthier. [Figure 13]

Figure 13: Do you think CalFresh helps participants eat healthy?
n=617



Conclusions

- 1. CalFresh participants and eligible households express strong support for testing program changes.** More than 60% of surveyed CalFresh participants and eligible households support a proposal to change allowable purchase within CalFresh by making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that can be purchased with benefits. A similar percentage of households (65%) support a proposal to simultaneously change allowable beverage purchases within CalFresh and increase total monthly benefits. A majority of CalFresh participants (61%) would be willing to participate in a project testing the implementation and impact of new purchasing rules combined with additional monthly benefits.
- 2. CalFresh participants and eligible households anticipate positive effects from potential program changes.** A majority of surveyed CalFresh participants (55%) anticipate that changes to allowable purchases (i.e., making unflavored milk, 100% juice, and plain water the only beverages that can be purchase with CalFresh) would result in their households drinking fewer beverages with added sugars. Nearly three in ten of surveyed eligible non-participants say the change in allowable beverage purchases would make them more interested in applying for CalFresh benefits.
- 3. Proposed changes could further bolster positive perceptions of CalFresh.** CalFresh is rated highly by participants and eligible households – with nearly 70% perceiving the program positively. Additionally, four in ten participants and eligible households say the described changes to allowable beverage purchases within CalFresh would make them feel more positively about the program.
- 4. CalFresh participants and eligible households recognize the negative health consequences of consuming sugary beverages.** More than 8 in 10 CalFresh participants and eligible households report that sugary beverages are bad for one's health, recognizing links to obesity and diabetes. A very large majority (86%) of CalFresh participants and eligible households with children believe it is important to

limit the amount of sweetened/flavored beverages that their children drink. Among the CalFresh participants and eligible households who are in favor of changing the types of beverage that can be purchased with CalFresh benefits, health concerns are the most widely cited basis of support.

Systemic efforts to reduce the consumption of sugary beverages are needed to improve the health of children and adults across the country. Testing changes to CalFresh in order to confirm whether the program can contribute to those systematic efforts is an important step forward. This study, aimed at assessing the attitudes and perceptions of CalFresh participants and eligible households, shows substantial support for testing changes to allowable purchases and benefit levels.

Appendix

Appendix 1			
Indicate if you think each one is healthy, unhealthy, or if you are not sure. (n=617)			
	Healthy	Unhealthy	Unsure
Plain water (bottled or tap water)	91	3	4
100% fruit juices	80	8	11
Unflavored milk	72	12	15
Unsweetened iced tea / coffee drinks	45	27	26
Sports drinks (like Gatorade)	33	35	29
Sweetened / flavored milk (like chocolate milk)	28	51	19
Sweetened / Flavored water (like Vitamin Water)	24	37	38
Less than 100% fruit juices (like Hi-C or Capri Sun)	17	55	25
Sweetened iced tea / coffee drinks	14	58	27
Soda (Diet)	6	73	18
Soda (Regular)	3	88	6
Energy Drinks (like Red Bull or Monster)	1	89	8

Appendix 2					
In an average week, how often do you drink each of the following beverages? (n=617)					
	5+ times per week	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week	Never
Plain water (bottled or tap water)	79	7	6	5	3
Unflavored milk	30	14	16	10	28
100% fruit juices	18	19	21	26	15
Sweetened iced tea / coffee drinks	13	9	17	23	38
Soda (Regular)	13	7	21	29	27
Unsweetened iced tea / coffee drinks	12	10	13	19	44
Soda (Diet)	9	4	7	18	59
Sports drinks (like Gatorade)	6	6	20	25	40
Less than 100% fruit juices (like Hi-C or Capri Sun)	5	9	16	27	40
Sweetened / Flavored water (like Vitamin water)	4	4	9	27	55
Sweetened / flavored milk (like chocolate milk)	3	3	11	23	59
Energy Drinks (like Red Bull or Monster)	1	3	5	14	75