# **Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program**

# **Executive Summaries of** 2002 Research Grants

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### Introduction

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs form a crucial component of the social safety net in the United States. Unlike many other social programs, food assistance programs provide benefits and have eligibility requirements that are uniform nationwide. The Food Stamp Program (FSP)—the largest Federal food assistance program—is, with few exceptions, available to all Americans whose income and assets fall below certain levels. Although the other food assistance programs are generally targeted to specific demographic groups, together the 15 Federal food assistance programs reach an estimated 1 in 5 Americans at some point each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Federal agency charged with administering almost all of the Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, has a particular interest in monitoring program effectiveness and contributing to the policy goal of a healthy, wellnourished population.

The purpose of the Small Grants Program is to stimulate new research on food and nutrition policy issues and to broaden the participation of social science scholars in the research effort. Grant recipients come from a number of disciplines and employ a variety of approaches in their research. They include economists, sociologists, nutritionists, anthropologists, and public health professionals. Some conduct exploratory research using ethnographic methods to examine underlying factors influencing program participation and outcomes. Others use descriptive statistics to characterize the populations of interest. Still others use statistical models to analyze individuals' responses to policy changes. All the methods employed contribute

to a growing body of knowledge of the food needs, coping behaviors, and food program outcomes of lowincome families and individuals.

## **Small Grants Program Partners**

ERS created partnerships with five academic institutions and research institutes to administer the Small Grants Program. Partner institutions have the advantage of being prominent members of the research community and being closer to the particular regional and State environments that influence program delivery and outcomes. ERS chose two of the five partner institutions for their experience in conducting policy-relevant poverty research at the national level and their ability to attract prominent scholars from a variety of social science disciplines to work on poverty and hunger issues. One of these is the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. IRP has a distinguished history of research and policy evaluation, including previous involvement in administering small research grants funded by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. The second partner is the Joint Center for Poverty Research (JCPR) at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. JCPR was established in 1996 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to conduct and fund research and to advise Federal policymakers on issues of poverty. Its small grants program with HHS and the Census Bureau served as a model for the ERS Small Grants Program.

ERS chose the remaining three of the five partner institutions for their ability to direct research of policy interest to USDA, either on a particular subset of food assistance and nutrition issues or on a particular

subpopulation of those eligible for food and nutrition assistance. Among these, the Department of Nutrition of the University of California at Davis brought to the Small Grants Program its expertise in nutrition education design and evaluation. A core group of faculty focuses its research efforts on identifying meaningful approaches to the design and evaluation of nutrition education for ethnically diverse, low-income families served by a variety of food assistance programs. The group views multidisciplinary research as critical to effectively monitoring the outcomes of nutrition programs.

The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) was chosen to administer small grants for its ability and commitment to conduct research on the problems of the rural poor in the South and its particular commitment to study the effects of welfare reform on this population. USDA has special ties to the SRDC because of the land-grant status of its member institutions. The South is also of particular interest to USDA because of the large proportion of rural poor and rural African-Americans who reside in the region.

American Indian families living on reservations are a significant component of the low-income rural population in many of the Western and Plains States. ERS chose the University of Arizona's American Indian Studies Program (AISP) to administer small grants for research on the food assistance and nutrition needs and problems of American Indians. AISP is the home of the only doctoral program in American Indian Studies in the country. The program maintains close ties to the tribal colleges, which were given land-grant status by Congress in 1994.

#### **Research Overview**

The research projects completed in 2002 cover six broad topic areas.

1. Food Insecurity and Hunger. The recent development of a Federal measure of food security makes it possible to monitor food-related material hardship in U.S. households and its relationship to program participation and other outcomes. Stormer and Harrison examined the association between household food security and the cognitive performance and social behavior of children entering kindergarten. Townsend and Melgar-Quiñonez assessed the relationship between household food security and the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children. Two research projects examined

food security among elderly households. Salmon and Gooden documented the food security status of elderly who were placed on a waiting list to receive homedelivered meals in North Carolina, while Frongillo and Wolfe used longitudinal data to examine the effect of receiving home-delivered meals on food security among elderly people in New York.

2. The Role of the Private Sector in Providing Food **Assistance.** Although Federal programs provide the bulk of food assistance in the United States, many households rely on private charitable organizations in their communities to help them meet their food needs. Cashwell and coauthors assessed the knowledge of the directors of private, faith-based emergency food providers in the South about the charitable choice provision of the 1996 welfare reform legislation that allows them to compete for government funds to administer social service programs. Nichols-Casebolt, focusing on households that get food from private charitable organizations, examined how use of Federal food and cash assistance by food pantry users in Virginia has changed since passage of the 1996 welfare reform legislation. Child care providers are another type of private-sector organization that may play a role in providing food assistance to low-income households. Eligible child care providers can participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), a Federal program that provides reimbursement for meals served to children and adults. Huddleston and Shobo assessed factors that influence participation in the CACFP by child care providers in Arkansas.

3. Dynamics and Life Course Patterns of Food Assistance Program Participation. Food assistance programs serve a dynamic population of low-income Americans. Many people enter and leave the programs each month, which calls for research that examines program participation over time. Rank and Hirschl used 30 years of data to assess the extent to which members of low-income households depend on the Food Stamp Program (FSP) over the course of their lives. Goetz and coauthors assessed factors contributing to FSP caseload decline during the late 1990s, with a focus on the role of county-level factors. Swann analyzed factors that influence a pregnant woman's decision to participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the length of time she participates in the program.

- 4. Nutritional Status and Diet Quality. Reliable measures of nutritional outcomes are needed to assess whether food assistance programs improve the nutritional well-being of low-income households. Siega-Riz and Kranz designed a tool to assess the quality of American preschoolers' diets. Bhattacharva and coauthors examined changes in the nutritional well-being of low-income households during cold-weather periods as part of their investigation of the "heat or eat" phenomenon—when families cut back on food expenditures. Parrish examined the nutritional content of the food available to the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa residents of the L'Anse Reservation in northern Michigan and the eating and exercise patterns of a sample of elders on the reservation.
- 5. Food Security and Food Assistance Programs in the Community Context. A household's participation in food assistance programs and its level of food security are likely to be influenced by the characteristics of the community in which it lives. Lopez and coauthors examined the availability of traditional foods on the Tohono O'odham Reservation and assessed how receptive food assistance recipients on the reservation would be to eating traditional foods if they were available. Bentley and coauthors, in partnership with a sample of residents of predominately minority neighborhoods in Durham, NC, conducted an analysis of the community factors related to household food security.

#### 6. Welfare Reform and Food Assistance Programs.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation introduced major changes to the cash welfare system in the U.S. These changes are likely to have affected FSP participation because, historically, many cash welfare recipients also received food stamps. Davis and coauthors examined the use of food assistance among Northern Cheyenne families in the post welfare reform environment. The welfare reform law also eliminated eligibility of most legal immigrants to receive food stamps. 1 Bollinger and Hagstrom examined the distinct patterns of FSP participation of refugees, who were exempted from the eligibility restrictions, and nonrefugee immigrants. White and coauthors examined whether factors other than the eligibility restrictions contribute to the decline in FSP participation among noncitizen households in Texas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Subsequent legislation in 1997 allowed legal immigrants who were disabled, elderly, or children living in the United States in August 1996 to regain eligibility for the Food Stamp Program. More recently, the 2002 Farm Act restored food stamp eligibility to legal noncitizens who have lived in the United States for at least 5 years or who are children or disabled, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States.