

Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program

Executive Summaries of 2001 Research Grants

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Introduction

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs—such as the Food Stamp Program; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and school meals programs—have been a major component of public assistance to the poor since the 1930s. Welfare reform legislation enacted in the mid-1990s increased the prominence of these programs in the social safety net for low-income households and the demand among policymakers for accurate information and a better understanding of program performance. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), as the Federal agency charged with administering food and nutrition assistance programs, has a particular interest in monitoring their effectiveness in alleviating food insecurity and contributing to the Federal policy goal of a healthy, well-nourished population.

In 1998, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) responded to the new public assistance environment and new information needs by creating the Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program. The purpose of the 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 program behavior. All the methods employed contribute to a growing body of knowledge on the food needs, coping behaviors, and food program outcomes of low-income 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 at the University of Wisconsin (IRP). 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. JCPR's small grants program with HHS and the Census Bureau served as a model for the ERS Small Grants Program.

ERS chose the remaining three 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 Western and Great 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 2001 cover four broad topic areas.

1. Food Insecurity and Hunger. The recent development of a Federal measure of food security and a consistent set of survey questions to assess it make it possible to monitor changes in the food-related hardships experienced by U.S. households. Winship and Jencks examined the changes in food insecurity and in other food-related problems of single mothers since the 1996 welfare reform legislation. Two research projects examined the measurement of food security. Bhattacharya, Currie, and Haider examined how well

food security was correlated with dietary adequacy among adults and children. Kaiser and Melgar-Quiñonez assessed how well the questions about food security translated to Hispanic households. Two studies examined the relationship between food insecurity and food insufficiency and negative health outcomes. Connell and coauthors focused on the correlation between food insufficiency and cardiovascular disease risk among adults in the South, while Greer and Poling focused on the relationship between food insecurity and health status among participants in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. Finally, Monroe and coauthors documented the food security status and diet quality of low-income families in Louisiana and South Carolina in the post-welfare reform era.

2. Food Assistance Program Participation. Parisi and coauthors examined the influence of individual and community characteristics in the decline in the Food Stamp Program caseload in urban and rural Mississippi. Tegegne and coauthors examined the decline in the Food Stamp Program caseload in Tennessee, with particular emphasis on the effect of local labor market conditions and changes in employment in the retail sector. Harkness and Newman examined the relationship between housing assistance and participation in the Food Stamp Program and the effect of housing assistance and food stamps on food expenditures. Lopez, Wyndham, and Reader documented the use of Federal food assistance programs on the Tohono O'odham Reservation and how the use of traditional Tohono O'odham foods can be encouraged through the programs.

3. Nutrition Education. Zastrow, Frenchman, and Smith conducted an evaluation of classes on healthy food choices and food preparation offered to food assistance program participants. Derrickson and coauthors evaluated the effect of a nutrition education intervention—administered by a private, nonprofit organization—on food security, fruit and vegetable consumption, and the ability to manage financial resources. USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program was the focus of a study by Dollahite and coauthors. They compared the costs of the program with its benefits, measured in terms of improved health outcomes.

4. Food Assistance, Nutrition, and Health. Chatterji and coauthors measured the correlation between WIC participation and breastfeeding. Yen

considered the related decisions to participate in the Food Stamp and WIC Programs and their association with nutrient intakes. Hiwalker and coauthors examined the relationship between participation in a food assistance program, food insecurity, nutrition, stress, and health. Gibson examined the relationship between

Food Stamp Program participation and obesity. Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones estimated how participation in the National School Lunch Program and WIC, as well as food security status, affected children's well-being.