

Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program

Executive Summaries of 2003 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 a number of other social programs, food assistance programs provide benefits and have eligibility requirements that are essentially 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. The other food assistance programs are generally targeted to specific demographic groups. Altogether, the 15 Federal food assistance programs collectively reach an estimated one in five Americans at some point each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers nearly all Federal food and nutrition assistance programs and has a particular interest in monitoring program effectiveness and contributing to the policy goal of a healthy, well-nourished 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 on the food needs, coping behaviors, and food program outcomes of low-income families and individuals. Oftentimes, the work supported by the Small Grants Program develops new theories or research methodologies, elements that become the basis for securing expanded funding from other public or private sources to further develop these promising innovations.

Small Grants Program Partners

ERS created partnerships with five academic institutions to administer the Small Grants Program. Partner institutions are prominent members of the research community and close to the 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 the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. The second partner is the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. The Harris Graduate School of Public Policy, which was part of the Joint Center for Poverty Research from 1996 to 2002, has a strong history of conducting and supporting research on America's poor.

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. The Department of Nutrition of the University of California, Davis, specializes 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. They view 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 its close working relationship with the region's 29 land-grant universities. The South is also of particular interest to USDA because of its populations of rural poor and rural African Americans.

American Indian families living on reservations are a significant component of the low-income rural population in many 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 2003 cover five broad topic areas.

1. Food Assistance and Child Well-Being. USDA administers four domestic food assistance programs that exclusively or primarily serve the nutritional needs of children. The child nutrition programs, which account for nearly a third of USDA's domestic food assistance expenditures, work individually and in concert to provide a nutrition safety net for children. Bitler and Currie examined the effect of participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) on the risk of childhood obesity and other health outcomes. They used recent changes in Medicaid eligibility that affected WIC participation to distinguish the effect of WIC on child health outcomes. Dunifon and Kowalewski-Jones explored the effect of participation in the National School Lunch Program on children's behavior, test scores, and body weight, and tested whether the effects differ for boys and girls.

2. 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. Van Hook and Balistreri examined the effect of the 1996 welfare reform legislation on the Food Stamp Program participation and benefits of households headed by immigrants, and on the food security of children of immigrants. Daponte and Stephens examined the relationship between food assistance, food spending, and food insecurity. Cason and coauthors interviewed a sample of migrant farm workers in Pennsylvania to assess their food security status and the potential barriers they face to achieving food security. Kabbani and Yazbeck examined how employment and food assistance program participation help food-insecure families avoid hunger. Harrison used data on California households to explore the relationship between food insecurity and the use of preventive medical care.

3. Dynamics of Program Participation and Food Insecurity. 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. Heflin used data that followed women who were receiving cash welfare benefits in early 1997 to examine the factors associated with their leaving the Food Stamp Program between 1997 and 2000. Mills and coauthors focused on working poor families and their use of food and cash assistance, comparing the rural South to the Nation as a whole. Leete and Bania examined how households transition on and off multiple assistance programs, using administrative data from 1992 to 2003.

4. Obesity. Since the mid-1970s, the prevalence of obesity and overweight has increased dramatically in the United States. The prevalence of overweight has tripled among children and adolescents over that period of time, and nearly two out of three adult Americans are either overweight or obese. Serrano and Cox documented the prevalence of obesity among both Latino and non-Latino youth from low-income households in Virginia. Olson and Strawderman examined the relationship between obesity and food insecurity

among a sample of pregnant women. Lopez and coauthors gathered information about the practical and cultural knowledge needed for educational programs to effectively encourage healthy eating habits among members of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Warner used the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health to examine overweight and obesity trends among adolescents in the South.

5. Community Factors, Dietary Intake, and Health. 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. Blanchard and Lyson developed a community-level measure of access to supermarkets and supercenter stores in the United States, and assessed the relationship between this access measure and the consumption of fruits and vegetables within the community. Parrish gathered information from elders of the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa tribe about the cultural practices associated with the preparation and consumption of traditional Ojibwa foods. Bezuneh and Yiheyis focused on two different types of housing assistance communities in Atlanta, GA, and documented the prevalence of food insecurity among housing assistance recipients in these two communities. Parisi and coauthors focused on how local community characteristics affect a community's ability to adapt to the provisions of the 1996 welfare reform legislation and to serve its low-income population.