

Chapter I

Introduction

Background

The Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program (FANRP) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Economic Research Service (ERS) addresses the research needs of the Nation's food assistance and nutrition programs. The three major programs include the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

Long-term research priorities of FANRP include:

- *Program Outcomes and Client Well-Being.* Studies of how programs enhance access to and choices of healthy diets and the effect of the programs on food security for low-income families.
- *Program Participation Dynamics.* Studies of program participation patterns for at-risk population groups, program gaps and overlaps, differences between rural and urban delivery, outreach, and dynamics of program entry and exit.

To pursue these priorities, FANRP requires high-quality data on program participation dynamics and program outcomes.

In 1998, the Committee on National Statistics and two related committees at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) convened a workshop entitled, "Evaluating Food Assistance Programs in an Era of Welfare Reform," that emphasized the importance of efficient data collection efforts for food assistance and nutrition programs. In the report from this workshop, Evanson et al. (2000) suggested that data collection efforts should address research questions relevant to current policy, as well as those that create a foundation for new research. They noted that these efforts could be located at the individual, local, State or national level.

Two additional reports also promoted interest in developing data resources for research. The first, by Hotz et al. (1998), summarized the importance of using administrative data for research purposes. The report made several suggestions for State and Federal agencies to develop permanent, ongoing data capacities with micro-level data from multiple administrative systems. The second, by UC-Data (1999), surveyed 26 States about their capabilities to use administrative data for research purposes. The report provides a detailed inventory of more than 100 administrative data extracts, many of which include links to FSP administrative files.

These reports signal a strong interest in developing new and/or improved data resources. The new resources could take advantage of "missed opportunities" by doing the following:

- enhancing existing data systems
- linking existing administrative data sources
- expanding one-time research projects
- using new technologies (e.g., the Internet) to create new data resources.

Project Overview

In response to the interest in new and/or improved data resources, the USDA awarded a contract to The Urban Institute (UI), Health Systems Research, Inc. (HSR), and The Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to develop data initiatives for research on food assistance and nutrition programs. The project's two primary purposes are as follows:

- identify 10 data collection/enhancement initiatives with the potential to improve the utility and cost-effectiveness of research on Federal food assistance and nutrition programs (Phase I of the project).
- develop implementation plans and conduct cost-efficiency analysis on 3 of the 10 options selected by ERS (Phase II of the project).

As a group, the 10 data initiatives had to meet 2 criteria. First, at least one initiative had to include some information on the FSP, WIC, and NSLP. Second, each initiative had to include some information about program outcomes, client well-being, or program processes.

Purpose of Report

The Phase I report selects and summarizes 10 promising data initiatives. It provides a detailed description of each, including background information, methodological approach, advantages and limitations, and potential cost issues. The initiatives as a group according to a specified set of evaluation criteria also are summarized.

ERS will use this report as a basis for selecting three initiatives for Phase II of the project. During Phase II, an implementation plan and cost-efficiency analysis will be described for each of the three initiatives. The Phase II report will:

describe the institutions the cooperation of which is required for implementation of the initiative

- provide an overview of the actions needed to complete implementation
- lay out a schedule specific steps ERS will need to take to implement the initiative
- describe potential difficulties in implementation

- provide a cost estimate for the undertaking covering ERS and each institution whose cooperation is necessary to implement the initiative.

Report Methodology

To select the 10 initiatives, we conducted a literature review, interviews with key informants, and, most importantly, an “initiative brainstorming meeting.” The literature review provided background information on innovative approaches to collecting and examining food assistance and nutrition program data that the consortium members could use as a reference in identifying and developing the 10 initiatives. The review covered food and nutrition Internet sites, technological advances in data collection methodologies, empirical research using survey and administrative data, and technical data development and integration projects. A summary of the findings has been compiled into a briefing book.

The purpose of the key informant interviews was to identify specific data collection and analysis issues of importance to stakeholders in food assistance and nutrition programs in order to prioritize this report’s 10 initiatives. The interviews were conducted with:

- State-level program administrators and directors in the Food Stamp, School Food Services, WIC, and Child Nutrition Programs
- staff of the Food and Nutrition Service responsible for administering food assistance programs at the Federal level
- staff of national organizations representing food assistance program administrators. A detailed summary of these interviews appears in Appendix A.

Finally, the consortium members met together for an all-day brainstorming meeting to identify an initial list of initiatives, which would later be shortened to a list of 10 for this report.¹ The group identified 18 potential data initiatives, which were ranked based on each initiative’s perceived value and feasibility.² The highest-ranked initiatives that satisfied the two data initiative criteria were selected. Summaries of the eight initiatives not included in the final list are in Appendix B.

¹ We revised the initial list of data initiatives from the original brainstorming meeting based on comments from ERS and conducted a second “electronic brainstorming meeting.” During this second meeting, consortium members had the opportunity to develop new initiatives based on the ERS’ comments.

² The initial list included 22 initiatives. It was shortened after combining certain overlapping initiatives and removing others that duplicated previous USDA efforts.