

II. BACKGROUND

A. Current Population Survey

The CPS is a monthly nationally representative survey of civilian non-institutionalized households conducted by the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Each month, interviewers contact households to obtain basic demographic information on all persons within the household, and more detailed labor force information for all persons over the age of 15. Each sample includes approximately 50,000 housing units. The Census selects the sampling units for the CPS to be representative at the state level. Consequently, unlike most surveys, such as the Survey of Income Program Participation (SIPP), researchers can use the CPS to generate estimates at the state level (e.g., unemployment statistics). Supplements are also added to each CPS that collect information on a variety of special topics, including food nutrition.

The Annual Demographic Supplement (March CPS) and the Food Security Supplement (generally occurs in April) are the most commonly used CPS supplements in FSP research.² The March supplement includes detailed information on sources of income (including FSP), which has been used extensively in analyses of FSP participants and non-participants. For example, researchers have used several cross-sections of the March CPS to examine the relationship between various factors (e.g., business cycles, individual characteristics) and FSP participation decisions (Corson and McConnell, 1990; Martini and Allen 1993; Yelowitz, 1995; Castner, 2000). The Food Security Supplement provides data on food spending, sufficiency, security, and program participation information. This supplement is the source of national and state-level statistics on food insecurity and hunger reported by the USDA in its series *Measuring Food Security in the United States* (Economic Research Services, 2001).

While most FSP research using the CPS focuses on the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is possible to develop a longitudinal file by matching households from the across months. The longitudinal files can be creating by using sample overlaps across each month (**Table I**).³ For example, in March and April of any given year (or any other two consecutive months), 75% of the sample includes respondents in both months. For longer samples, such as one year, 50% of the sample is interviewed in both periods. Because of the nature of the interview process, linkages are not available beyond 16 months. Recently, Mills, et al. (2001) used the longitudinal portion of the CPS to examine exits from the FSP program.

² The 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2001 Food Security supplements were conducted in April. The 1996 and 2000 supplements were conducted in September. The 1998 supplement was conducted in August.

³Specifically, researchers can use the eight rotation group structure to link households across monthly surveys. Each monthly CPS includes eight rotation groups. A rotation group is interviewed for four consecutive months and then, after an eight-month rest period, for another four months a year later. Each month a new rotation group of addresses, or one-eighth of the total sample, is introduced into the CPS. Because the CPS is a household level survey, linking across different CPS months is complex. Specifically, movers are not followed which can create both matching and selection (e.g., movers tends to be disproportionately low-income) issues.

Table 1: Percent of Sample Overlap Across Monthly Current Population Surveys

Months	Overlap with Previous CPS
1	75
2	50
3	25
4-8	0
9	12.5
10	25
11	37.5
12	50
13	37.5
14	25
15	12.5
16 or more	0

(Source: The Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000)

B. FSP Administrative Data

Unfortunately, there is no coordinated effort to organize and transform the micro-level information in state FSP administrative databases into a single national database. One major issue is that each state has its own set of protocols to access the administrative databases and, in some states, obtaining this access may involve contacting multiple state agencies (see Wittenburg, et al., 2001 for more details).

Fortunately, in part because of several state program evaluations, many states have created administrative data extracts for research purposes. UC-Data (1999) found over 100 administrative data extracts in a recent survey of 26 states, many of which included FSP administrative records.⁴ Specifically, they found that eighty percent of these states had major external projects or databases in development. They documented linkages between records from the FSP and several other programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Foster Care, Child Care, JOBS, Child Support, and Unemployment Insurance (UI).

The most promising state FSP administrative extracts for this initiative include longitudinal histories of program participation by FSP participants. These files could be linked to the CPS, which would allow researchers to examine changes in FSP participation over multiple periods. The structure of the available administrative files for research differs across states. In general, states may have two types of longitudinal files. The first is a "cohort-specific" file that captures the histories of individuals who were participating in the FSP in a particular month. For example, this file could include the histories of March 2000 FSP participants. The second is a "full history file" that captures individuals who ever participated in the FSP program. Unlike the cohort-specific file,

⁴ Unfortunately, we do not have available full information of other state files not covered by the survey, but we are aware that several other states also have created similar linked databases.

this file could include the histories of FSP participants from multiple periods (e.g., all former and current FSP participants). The second type of file is preferable for the linkage because it contains information on a larger pool of participants (and, hence, provides a large possible sample of linked cases).

Currently, Abt Associates (2001) is examining the potential uses of administrative data for food nutrition and assistance programs from the same 26 states surveyed in the UC-Data study. They are surveying state agencies and school food authorities to inventory their system capabilities, data sharing arrangements, record linkages, and "best practices." Their analysis will include information on FSP, as well as WIC and other child nutrition programs (e.g., School Lunch). They are also testing the feasibility of linking data from multiple food assistance programs in select states.

The findings from the Abt study could significantly enhance this proposed initiative if it identifies the potential to use other state files as a link to CPS records. Of particular relevance will be Abt's summary of characteristics of the nutrition assistance information systems and data sharing agreements within states. Specifically, it will be important to understand the protocols for accessing data from various state systems. For example, the USDA may choose to link administrative data from states that have less cumbersome requirements for data access and usage. In addition, the Abt study may uncover linkages to other food nutrition and assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), that could enhance the amount of information available that could be linked from some states.