

# Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program

## Executive Summaries of 1998 Research Grants

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### Introduction

Food and nutrition assistance programs—food stamps; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the school meals programs; and others—have been a major component of public assistance to the poor since their origins in the 1930's. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the Federal agency charged with administering food and nutrition assistance programs, and as such, it has a particular interest in seeing that they are as effective as possible at alleviating food insecurity and contributing to the goal of a healthy, well-nourished population. Fundamental changes in the public assistance program environment brought about by welfare reform in the mid-1990's reduced cash assistance programs and left food and nutrition assistance among the only remaining entitlement programs available to all low-income households in the United States. This change in the role of food and nutrition programs in the social safety net increased the need for accurate information on how well the programs are working.

In 1998, the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) created partnerships with five academic institutions and research institutes to establish the Small Grants Program for food and nutrition assistance research. The purpose of the program is to stimulate food and nutrition assistance research in the new public assistance environment 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 conducted exploratory research using ethnographic methods to examine underlying factors influencing program participation and outcomes. Others used descriptive statistics to characterize the populations of interest. Still others used 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. The project summaries are grouped here by the administering institution. The reader will find nearly as much variation in approaches and specific topics within the individual programs as between them.

### Research Overview

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. The Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin (IRP) has a distinguished history of research, including previous involvement in administering small research grants funded by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. IRP awarded four small grants in 1998/99:

- In their study of private food assistance, Daponte and Bade estimated that \$2.3 billion is spent nationally to deliver free food through a network of food pantries. They also found large differences in the level of assistance provided to the needy through local food banks.
- Derrickson et al. conducted a validation study of the USDA food security measure in which they confirmed the validity of the food security scale, but proposed an alternative method of using the measure to classify individuals as hungry or food insecure.
- Kanaiaupuni and Donato conducted a study of Mexican migration and legal status effects on household food expenditures and child health. They found that the children of parents who legally work and reside in the United States have better health and greater access to food, independent of how long parents have lived in the country.
- In their examination of the effects of WIC participation on child health and development, Kowaleski-Jones and Duncan confirmed the positive effect of WIC on birthweight. Their results also suggest that prenatal WIC participation confers advantages in later childhood social and behavioral development through a positive effect on child temperament.

The Joint Center for Poverty Research at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University was established in 1996 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to conduct and fund research and to advise Federal policymakers on issues of poverty. Their existing small grants program with HHS and the Census Bureau served as a model for the FANRP Small Grants Program. The Joint Center funded five projects in 1998/99.

- Borjas analyzed trends in immigrant Food Stamp Program participation, which exceeded the domestic participation rate until 1995. Since 1995, the decline in immigrant participation has exceeded the decline in domestic household participation.
- Chernick developed and tested a model to estimate the extent to which States use federally funded food stamps in place of State-funded cash assistance to shift to the Federal Government more of the cost of supporting low-income families. His preliminary results showed an almost dollar-for-dollar offset of

food stamps for cash assistance with policy changes that increase food stamp benefits.

- Lee et al. examined program effects on children in their study of WIC. They found that WIC participation continued to increase while cash assistance and Food Stamp Program participation declined following welfare reform in 1996. WIC participation was associated with higher rates of receipt of preventive healthcare services and a lower incidence of health problems related to inadequate nutrition among the children in their sample.
- Page offered evidence of an increase in welfare caseloads following an increase in minimum wages, and suggested minimum wage legislation may not necessarily be an efficient means of increasing the incomes of low-skilled single mothers.
- Reid found evidence of negative effects of food insecurity on children's school achievement and psychological well-being, but no effect on children's height- and weight-for-age.

ERS chose the remaining three of the five partner institutions for their ability to direct research on a particular subset of food assistance and nutrition issues or on a particular subpopulation of those eligible for food and nutrition assistance who are of policy interest to USDA. Among these, the Department of Nutrition of the University of California at Davis (UC Davis) brought to the Small Grants Program its expertise in nutrition education design and evaluation. A core group of faculty there have focused research efforts on identifying meaningful approaches to nutrition education development and evaluation for ethnically diverse, low-income families served by a variety of food assistance programs. They view multidisciplinary research as critical in effectively monitoring the outcomes of nutrition programs. The three projects funded through UC Davis demonstrate the broad scope of nutrition problems to be addressed. They also show to some degree the challenges involved in determining nutrition and health outcomes from food assistance program participation when differences between participants and nonparticipants interfere with measuring program effects.

- Frongillo and Lee found that food-insecure elderly have poorer nutritional and health status than food-secure elderly. Among the food insecure, those who received food assistance measured more poorly on health and nutrition status than those who did not

receive it. This counterintuitive result demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing between the effects of program participation and individual behavior; i.e., those who are worse off initially are more likely to participate in food assistance programs.

- Perez-Escamilla et al. compared food-security status and nutrition intakes among preschoolers in food stamp participant and nonparticipant households. They found that while nutrient intakes in nonparticipant households were lower than in participant households, caffeine intake from sodas among preschoolers was higher in participant households, pointing to the need for nutrition education. Food security was higher among households with food stamps in their study, but the level of food security observed was a function of how long food stamps lasted each month.
- The Wang and Dixon study shows that bone mineral density, an indicator of osteoporosis, was not positively associated with either WIC or Food Stamp Program participation in women. Bone mineral density increased with education in their study, but only among white women.

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 focus on the effects of welfare reform on this population. By virtue of the land-grant status of the SRDC member institutions, USDA has a special relationship with the SRDC. The South is also of particular interest because of the large proportion of rural poor and rural African Americans who reside in the region. SRDC funded six studies in 1998/99.

- Goetz et al. examined the effect of an economic downturn on welfare caseloads and the relative importance of the recipients' characteristics versus local economic conditions in determining what happens to caseloads. The local unemployment rate and the educational level of recipients both had significant effects on caseloads, leading the authors to recommend policies aimed at these variables to mediate the impact of economic downturns.
- Kurzynske and McGough evaluated a relatively simple and inexpensive food security survey method that could be repeated periodically. They found that the food insecure identified in the Kentucky Survey, a statewide telephone survey, were similar to the

food insecure in national survey data, though the proportion of food insecure in Kentucky was below that measured from national survey data for the State. The poor, those with less formal education, families with children, minorities, and those already receiving food stamps and WIC were most likely to be food insecure.

- Lokken involved her geriatrics students in investigating the conditions of hunger, food insecurity, and nutritional risk among the elderly in Mississippi. They were surprised to find that among low-income elderly, those currently receiving food stamps were more food insecure. Their regression results showed three factors to be significantly related to food insecurity/hunger: receiving food stamps, being African American, and inadequate cooking utensils such as pots and pans.
- Molnar et al. examined and compared food assistance availability and use through private, non-profit food pantries in rural and urban communities in eastern Alabama. They found that rural users indicated higher levels of satisfaction with food pantry services than urban users. They also found that churches play an important role in distributing private food assistance, particularly in rural areas. Overall, urban food pantry users and non-users were more likely to receive or apply for food stamps than rural users and non-users.
- The small grant received by Monroe et al. helped to fund their continuing study of women transitioning from welfare to work in rural Louisiana, which focuses on food needs and coping strategies. Most of the women in their study, to date, were not experiencing food insecurity. Program benefits such as Medicaid were a much higher priority and concern. Nearly all the women still received food stamps but few used food pantries or surplus commodity distributions, services that may not be available in their rural communities.
- Zekeri studied the adoption of electronic benefits transfer (EBT) for delivering food stamps in Alabama from the recipients' perspective. He found that most food stamp recipients preferred EBT to paper coupons. EBT was viewed as a better way to deliver benefits. EBT eliminated waiting for delivery of food stamps and increased security and protection against loss and theft. Recipients also felt the system reduced the social stigma of receiving public assistance.

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 focusing 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 have a special relationship to USDA by virtue of their land-grant status gained in 1994. The five projects conducted by tribal college faculty, students, and staff all addressed in some way the particular problems unique to life on a reservation and in remote rural areas—sparse populations with limited access to services, few opportunities for employment, lack of transportation, and roads made periodically impassible by weather.

- Bauer et al. focused on the problem of access to healthy food for reservation residents. They found limited availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain foods, and low-fat milk in the small trading posts and convenience stores that are often the only stores nearby on the extensive Navajo reservation.
- Davis et al. also found remoteness and lack of transportation to be a barrier to many Northern Cheyenne who are eligible for food assistance programs but are unable to access program benefits.
- Grant et al. conducted a survey of tribal elders, other community members, and service providers to document the changes in eating habits and food preparation among Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples since the establishment of the Fort Belknap Reservation and the introduction of Federal food assistance programs there.
- Henry et al. found higher-than-average levels of food insecurity among Oglala Lakota College

students, and a need for basic nutrition, food safety, and preventive health information targeting students and their parents.

- Phillips and Finn examined food choices and weight control practices among Cheyenne River Lakota households and also found potential for improvement in healthy eating habits through nutrition education and a need to create more opportunities for physical activity.

The ability to determine accurately the outcomes of food assistance and nutrition programs, both as measures of a program's success and of its unintended consequences, is among the policy-relevant issues that this Small Grants Program endeavors to address. One of the complicating factors for program impact research is that available data rarely include information to measure program impacts directly, as when individuals are observed before and after program participation, or when a control group is created by randomly selecting individuals to participate or not. Instead, eligible participants and nonparticipants are compared at a point in time. But if the characteristics of these groups differ, nonparticipants will not be a good control group. In fact, if programs are effectively targeted, people who are most at risk of food insecurity and hunger will be those most likely to enroll and participate in food assistance programs. Thus Food Stamp Program participants are found to be worse off than eligible nonparticipants in terms of food insecurity, medical needs, and other measures of well-being. The Food Stamp Program may make participants better off than they otherwise would be, but not better off than eligible nonparticipants as a group. This self-selection problem is common throughout behavioral research. As always, one should be cautious in interpreting results whenever this estimation problem is present. We hope to encourage creative solutions to this problem and other challenges posed by food assistance and nutrition policy research through the Small Grants Program.