Institute for Research on Poverty
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The Evolution, Cost, and Operation of the Private Food Assistance Network

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Grant awarded by: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin

In the past 20 years, delivery of assistance to the poor has drastically changed. While the availability of cash assistance has decreased, the availability of food assistance has widened. The most substantial change in assistance available to the needy may be the emergence of food pantries as a source of free food to prepare at home. According to research conducted by Second Harvest, the national network of food banks, approximately 19 million individuals in the United States received an estimated 960.5 million pounds of food from food pantries in 1997. Still, many policymakers, academics, and participants in the private food assistance network know little about this network. This study fills the knowledge gap on the private food assistance network.

Researchers Daponte and Bade ask three basic questions about the private food assistance network: How did it evolve? How much does it cost? How does it operate? Their paper provides a detailed examination of domestic food policy since the 1930's. They show how agricultural and welfare policies contributed to developing a supply of free food for the needy, and how private efforts, such as the formation of Second Harvest and its member food banks, facilitated the creation of a private food assistance network to distribute this food through about 34,000 food pantries. Their research also highlights policy changes in the Food Stamp Program that, they argue, contributed to the tremendous demand for free food in the early 1980's.

Daponte and Bade used 1997 data from Second Harvest to estimate private food assistance network costs. Including the cost of food, the value of volunteer labor hours, and other food pantry operating expenses, they estimate total network costs at approximately $2.3 billion, or about one-twelfth the size of the Food Stamp Program.

Daponte and Bade address the operation of the private food assistance network through case studies of two metropolitan food banks. Their examination of the processes and policies surrounding the Connecticut Food Bank and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank highlights the heterogeneous nature of the private food assistance network. Although these two food banks operate in areas with approximately the same number of people living in households with incomes below the poverty level, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank distributes four times as much food as the Connecticut Food Bank. The authors assert that historical forces, personnel characteristics, and the political environments in these communities influence the amount of food their private food assistance networks can distribute to needy households.

The authors conclude with recommendations for making the public food safety net more effective, noting the value of private food assistance as a supplement to the current public food assistance system.

Independent Validation of the Core Food Security Module with Asians and Pacific Islanders

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Grant awarded by: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin

Derrickson et al. conducted an independent validation of the national household food security measure—the Core Food Security Module (CFSM) and its categorical algorithm—with Asians and Pacific Islanders in Hawaii. They conducted their research in three parts: a qualitative study (n=61), a pilot stability study (n=61), and a study replicating methods used to develop the CFSM (n= 1664). Caucasians, Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians, Filipinos, and Samoans residing in Hawaii comprised the ethnic groups of focus.

The authors confirmed the face validity of the CFSM with Asians and Pacific Islanders in Hawaii. Their findings indicate that the CFSM yields valid and reliable scale measures among Asians and Pacific Islanders in Hawaii, with the possible exception of American Samoans (n=23). However, they suggest weak credibility, validity, and stability of the CFSM categorical algorithm: 27 percent of 111 households identified as food secure with one or more affirmative replies responded affirmatively to "unable to eat balanced meals"; 50 percent of 64 households classified as experiencing moderate hunger responded affirmatively to "respondent hungry"; and only 62 percent were consistently classified in the same category over time.

Derrickson et al. developed and tested a "face valid" algorithm using three categories. They classified one affirmative response as "at risk of hunger." Those who responded affirmatively to either the "respondent hungry" item or the "adults didn't eat for a whole day" item were classified as "adult hungry," and those who responded affirmatively to the "children hungry" item were classified as "child hungry." Compared with the national algorithm, they found this algorithm resulted in a lower percentage classified as food secure (85 percent versus 78 percent), a greater percentage classified consistently as food insecure without hunger over time (57 percent versus 80 percent), and improved face and concurrent validity.

In general, the authors found that progressively deteriorating food security status, as experienced in Hawaii, resulted in decreased vegetable intake, increased reliance on Saimin (a popular dried noodle product), and increased use of alternative sources of food (food pantry use, eating with friends, fishing, etc.). Respondents most often perceived "balanced meals" as meals including "meat, starch, and a vegetable." Derrickson et al. suggest caution when extending their results to ethnic groups not studied. In conclusion, they argue that their findings warrant further investigation of a shorter household food security measure and a reassessment of the CFSM categorical algorithm.

Recency of Migration and Legal Status Effects on Food Expenditures and Child Well-Being

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Grant awarded by: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin

Recent years have witnessed growing debate about the integration prospects of U.S. immigrants. Widespread attention has focused on the costs of immigration, especially in cities that suffered from the onset of a deep recession in the late 1980's. Since that time, public concern about immigrants in the U.S. economy has led to welfare reform that limited public assistance to legal immigrants who, some studies reported, imposed costs to U.S. taxpayers through their use of educational and welfare services. Steady growth in undocumented migration has accompanied these changes. By the end of the 1980's, estimates suggested a gross inflow of 3.8 million persons from Mexico alone, which represented a substantial increase from the estimated 99,000 illegal Mexican immigrants of two decades earlier.

Recent research has accumulated considerable evidence about the challenges that confront individuals with uncertain legal status in U.S. society. Undocumented households tend to be poor, often living below established poverty thresholds. Like other immigrants, those without documents are especially likely to be medically underserved, uninsured, and relying on emergency medical care, which increases the risks of preventable death. Many are ineligible or afraid to use public service programs designed to help poor families. Yet to date, primarily because of data limitations, we know little about the effects of illegal immigrant status on social behavior and well-being.

Kanaiaupuni and Donato address this gap with new data from a longitudinal, binational project (Health and Migration Survey) that surveys households in Mexico and in the United States. The data from this report come from a total of 262 households randomly chosen in two migrant destination neighborhoods, one in Houston and the other just north of San Diego. They used these data to examine the health effects of legal status, nativity, and recency of migration. The authors focus their analysis on child health and food security.

Kanaiaupuni and Donato use multivariate analysis to predict household food expenditures, breastfeeding behavior, children's current illness (serious conditions lasting at least 10 days), and mother-reported overall health status of children. Their sample includes 232 children under 7 years old, all but 40 of whom are U.S. citizens. They find children are much better off if both parents have legal documents—they have more food, higher household incomes, and better health status. Children with at least one undocumented parent suffer significant health costs—their chances of poor health are between three and eight times higher than children with legal parents. Their results also suggest that the advantages conferred by legal status are insensitive to time; net of legal status, children of recent immigrants are no healthier than those whose parents have lengthier U.S. exposure. The authors anticipate future research that will explore the mechanisms that contribute to these differences. To date, their findings suggest that children living in illegal immigrant households would benefit from targeted public health, food assistance, and nutrition policies.

Effects of Participation in the WIC Food Assistance Program on Children's Health and Development: Evidence from NLSY Children

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Grant awarded by: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin

Established in 1972, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has as its goal to increase the nutrition level and general well-being of children. The WIC program is currently one of the fastest growing Federal assistance programs. Program expenditures for WIC have almost tripled in the past two decades, from $1.3 billion in 1980 to $3.7 billion in 1997. Part of the popularity of WIC has been because it is one of the most directly targeted and interventionist of the Federal welfare programs. Available evaluations of this program testify to its value in reducing infant mortality, rates of low birthweight, and early child anemia. However, many of the WIC program evaluations were conducted prior to 1990, and though many were of high quality, they either relied on data from a single State, or compared results across selected States. More current research is needed to examine the potential benefits of WIC participation among a nationally representative sample of women and their children.

Much of the previous work on the effects of WIC has focused on infant birthweight, nutrient intakes, presence of anemia, and propensity of mothers to breastfeed their infants. Fewer studies have estimated the effects of WIC participation on developmental infant measures, such as motor functioning, social functioning, and temperament, because of data limitations. The paucity of such studies is unfortunate because developmental outcomes are important predictors of later childhood social and behavioral development. Others have also identified as an important research goal the need for information about the effects of WIC on a wider range of child outcomes.

This study from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth investigates the effects of WIC participation on birthweight, motor and social skills, and temperament for a national sample of children born between 1990 and 1996. The authors use sibling fixed-effect models to account for potential unmeasured heterogeneity among the mothers of children in this sample. Both their ordinary least squares and fixed-effect regression estimates confirm the positive effect of prenatal WIC participation on infant birthweight. They argue that these results, based on a national sample and accounting for fixed effects, offer stronger evidence of the program's positive effects than previous studies. WIC participation had no significant effects on the motor or social skill indices in their model. However, their fixed-effect estimates show that prenatal WIC participation is associated with lower scores on measures of difficult temperament. They find this result encouraging, suggesting that further research accounting for sibling effects may uncover evidence of more extensive benefits from WIC than previously documented.