

Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program

Executive Summaries of 2000 Research Grants

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Introduction

Federal 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 1930s. Welfare reforms enacted in the mid-1990s increased the prominence of these programs in the social safety net for low-income households, and increased the demand among policy-makers for accurate information on and a better understanding of program performance. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), as the Federal agency charged with administering food and nutrition assistance programs, has a particular interest in monitoring their effectiveness in alleviating food insecurity and contributing to the Federal policy goal of a healthy, well-nourished population.

In 1998, USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) responded to the new public assistance environment and new information needs by creating the Small Grants Program for Food and Nutrition Assistance Research. The purpose of the 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

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.

Small Grants Program Partners

ERS created partnerships with five academic institutions and research institutes to administer the Small Grants Program. Partner institutions have the advantage of being prominent members of the research community and being closer to the particular 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 at the University of Wisconsin (IRP). 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 Joint Center for Poverty Research (JCPR) at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. JCPR was established in 1996 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to conduct and fund research and to advise Federal policymakers on issues of poverty. Its existing small grants program with HHS and the Census Bureau served as a model for the ERS Small Grants Program.

ERS chose the remaining three of the five partner institutions for their ability to direct research either on a particular subset of food assistance and nutrition issues or on a particular subpopulation of those eligible for

food and nutrition assistance who were of policy interest to USDA. Among these, the Department of Nutrition of the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) brought to the Small Grants Program its expertise in nutrition education design and evaluation. A core group of faculty there focuses 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 to effectively monitoring the outcomes of nutrition programs.

The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) was chosen to administer small grants because of its expertise in, and commitment to, conducting research on the problems of the rural poor in the South and its particular commitment to studying the effects of welfare reform on this population. USDA has special ties to the SRDC because of the land-grant status of the center's member institutions. The South is also of particular interest to USDA because of the large proportion of rural poor and rural African Americans who reside in the region.

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 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

This year's research projects cover four broad topic areas. The first of these is food security. The development over the last several years of a widely accepted and consistent food security measure is making it possible to monitor changes in the food security status of U.S. households and individuals, and to examine the impacts of economic change and policy interventions on food security. Two of the research projects reported in this section consider food sufficiency status (a more narrowly defined concept than the USDA food security measure), assessing its relationship to physical and mental health in one case (Siefert et al.) and to nutrient intakes in the other (Connell et al.). The other two

projects take up issues of food security measurement. Derrickson summarizes her research and recommendations on the use of the food security measure in Hawaii, and Palmer Keenan et al. examine the potentially unsafe means by which some families and individuals maintain food security.

A second topic area concerns nutrition and food assistance programs. In this group, Kraak et al. examine low-income women's attitudes and beliefs about nutrient supplement use and the implications of allowing the purchase of supplements with food stamps. Cason et al. examine the effect of nutrition education on nutrient intakes and food sufficiency among food stamp recipients and low-income nonrecipients. Marquis et al. consider the effects of food stamp receipt and acculturation on the diets and health of adult Hispanic Americans. The diets of Navajo preschool children are the focus of research conducted by Pareo and Bauer, in which they measure nutrient intake among children participating in the Head Start program. Perez-Escamilla and Haldeman investigate how low-income households use food labels and their knowledge of nutrition in conjunction with food stamps to affect diet quality.

The use and performance of public food assistance programs are the focus of the third topic area. Davis et al. confront the complex barriers to food assistance program use and achieving food security for residents of the Northern Cheyenne reservation. Mills et al. look for economic and programmatic explanations of Food Stamp Program exits among single female-headed families, some of whom are leaving the Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) program but remain eligible for food stamps. Swenson et al. analyze the determinants of food stamp caseload changes in Texas, comparing the dynamics of caseloads in metro and nonmetro counties in that State. Brien and Swann examine the joint effects of participating in WIC, the Food Stamp Program, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) on birth outcomes, where previous research has focused on the impact of WIC alone.

A final study occupies the fourth topic area of private food assistance. In this, Bartowski and Regis take a critical look at faith-based private food assistance and the Charitable Choice option, whereby States may contract with local charitable organizations, including churches, to provide social services.