

## Welfare Reform and Food Assistance Programs

### Access to Food Assistance Programs Among Northern Cheyenne Families

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Federal food assistance programs are an integral part of the social safety net on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana. In 2000, almost half of Northern Cheyenne families with children lived in poverty, and in 2002, the unemployment rate for the Northern Cheyenne Nation was 71 percent. Previous research has shown that about one-third of Northern Cheyenne Reservation residents use food stamps and one-third receive USDA commodities through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).<sup>7</sup> This study examined the use of food assistance by two population groups that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse economic conditions on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation: seasonal workers and families in which the adults face high barriers to employment.

The authors used administrative data to document changes in the use of Federal food and cash assistance since the mid-1990s in Rosebud County, MT, where much of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is located. In addition, the authors interviewed 32 reservation residents who are either seasonal workers or individuals who face high barriers to employment. The interviews provided detailed accounts of individual and family experiences with the use of Federal food

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<sup>7</sup>FDPIR primarily provides commodity foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations. Many households participate in the FDPIR as an alternative to the Food Stamp Program because they do not have easy access to food stamp offices or authorized food stores.

assistance programs. The authors compared the information collected from seasonal workers with data they had collected from other reservation residents in an earlier study.

The study found that the average monthly number of food stamp recipients fell almost 30 percent between 1996 and 2000 and then rose 8 percent between 2000 and 2001. The decline in the use of food assistance is particularly striking because economic conditions for the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, unlike for most of the rest of the country, did not improve during the 1990s. The number of households that received commodities through the FDPIR increased slightly between July 1998 and July 1999. However, the most recent program data show that the average number of households receiving commodities decreased almost 16 percent between 2000 and 2002.

Most survey respondents are seasonal workers, who most often cited fire-fighting as their seasonal job. Seasonal workers also reported doing construction work, selling firewood, babysitting, cleaning houses, or working at local schools as a school aide, cook, or bus driver. The single-parent families in the survey are much more aware of the food assistance programs that may be available to them than other types of families. Single-parent families with children are most likely to be eligible for and receive cash assistance, and their participation in the cash assistance program is likely to make them more aware of other Federal assistance programs.

The seasonal workers who do access food assistance programs reported that the FSP and FDPIR are important in helping them meet their food needs. FSP participants appreciate the flexibility that they have to purchase the kinds of food that they want but noted that the high food prices on the reservation make it difficult to stretch their food stamp benefits. Commodity recipients like the amount and kinds of foods they receive. Many reported that the monthly commodity package provides them with more food than they could buy with food stamps and that the application process for FDPIR is simpler than for the FSP. A number of seasonal workers also reported difficulty in establishing their eligibility for the FSP when their employment ends. However, whether this is due to actual eligibility restrictions or to misinformation about the program's eligibility requirements is not clear.

The authors collected information that allowed them to assess the level of food insecurity, stress, and health problems among survey respondents. They found that seasonal workers experience levels of food insecurity and nutritional risk that are almost as high as those experienced by the unemployed. Seasonal workers reported higher levels of stress than the unemployed. While seasonal workers reported that they are able to provide for the needs of their families during the part of the year that they are employed, they do not consider the income they receive to be sufficient to last

the remainder of the year. The limitations of the local economy prevent most seasonal workers from finding alternative employment.

The cultural norm on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is to share food and help family members when they are in need. However, because poverty and unemployment rates are so high, this dependence on extended family stretches the resources of most families very thin. Therefore, Federal food assistance programs represent an important source of support for these families.

## Food Stamp Program Participation of Refugees and Immigrants: Measurement Error Correction for Immigrant Status

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After two decades of increasing participation in cash and noncash public assistance programs by immigrant households, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 drastically altered the availability of Federal public assistance to legal immigrants. Immigrants who were not yet naturalized by 1996 or who entered the country after August 1996 became ineligible for Federal benefits, although States had the option to provide them with cash assistance or Medicaid benefits.<sup>8</sup> Refugees, however, were given a 5-year exemption from the eligibility restrictions on Federal benefits that applied to other legal immigrants. Despite the exemption, since 1996, the participation rate of refugees in public assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program (FSP), has fallen at least as fast as for other foreign-born residents. FSP participation of refugees fell 37 percent between 1994 and 1997. During the same

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<sup>8</sup>Subsequent legislation in 1997 allowed legal immigrants who were disabled, elderly, or children living in the United States in August 1996 to regain eligibility for the Food Stamp Program. More recently, the 2002 Farm Act restored food stamp eligibility to legal noncitizens who have lived in the United States for at least 5 years or who are children or disabled, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States.

period, participation in the FSP dropped 30 percent for immigrants and 21 percent for native-born citizens.

The authors used the Current Population Survey to estimate the impact of refugee status on FSP participation from 1994 to 2001 and estimated the effect of PRWORA on FSP participation of refugees. They corrected for errors in the measurement of refugee status and for the misreporting of FSP participation, which allowed them to get consistent estimates of the effect of refugee status and PRWORA on FSP participation.

The study found that refugees and nonrefugee immigrants have distinct patterns of FSP participation. Refugees are more likely than other immigrants to use food stamps near the time of their arrival in the U.S. However, the FSP participation rate of refugees declines with the number of years since their arrival in the U.S., whereas this decline does not occur among nonrefugee immigrants. The FSP participation rate of refugees is more sensitive to the economic climate than that of other immigrants or of U.S. citizens. The authors also found differences in program use by citizenship status. Immigrants who opt for citizenship are more likely to participate in welfare programs than those who do not.

Even though FSP participation fell 37 percent between 1994 and 1997, welfare reform does not appear to have had the unintended consequence of reducing FSP participation among refugees. The study results suggest that food stamp use among refugees is primarily explained by their response to favorable economic conditions, rather than to welfare reform.

The authors found that the usual approach to measuring refugee status leads to a substantial underestimate of the effect of refugee status on participation in the FSP. Additionally, the failure to account for response error in program participation causes an underestimate of the effects of all variables on participation. The methods used in this study can be applied in research on program participation, to correct for these measurement problems and to ensure that research findings will be useful to policy analysis.

## Food Stamp Receipt by Families With Noncitizen Household Heads in Rural Texas Counties

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The 1996 welfare reform legislation eliminated the eligibility of most legal immigrants to receive food stamps, although it did make exceptions based on a legal immigrant's refugee status, work history, or U.S. veteran status. Subsequent legislation in 1997 allowed legal immigrants who were disabled, elderly, or children living in the United States in August 1996 to regain eligibility for the Food Stamp Program (FSP). More recently, the 2002 Farm Act restored food stamp eligibility to legal noncitizens who have lived in the United States continuously for at least 5 years or who are children or disabled, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States.

In 2000, noncitizens made up almost 10 percent of the population in Texas. Noncitizens were more than twice as likely as citizens to live in poor households. Although noncitizens in Texas are concentrated in metropolitan areas, about 5 percent of people in nonmetropolitan counties are noncitizens. Because of the large noncitizen population in Texas, the elimination of the eligibility of most noncitizens to receive food stamps would be expected to have a large impact on the State's FSP caseload. This study examined the decline in the number of households in Texas headed by a noncitizen that participated in the FSP between 1995 and 2001 and the factors that contribute to the decline. It also compared the decline in the noncitizen FSP caseload in metropolitan counties with the decline in nonmetropolitan counties.

The study found that the number of FSP households in Texas declined 45 percent between 1995 and 2001, while the number of FSP households headed by a noncitizen declined 72 percent. The proportion of elderly household heads among noncitizen FSP households increased from 10 percent in 1995 to almost 25 percent in 2001, a trend that is consistent with the restoration of FSP eligibility to elderly noncitizens.

The authors used monthly FSP administrative caseload data to examine the factors associated with the decline in the noncitizen FSP caseload. While the eligibility restrictions contribute to much of the decline, the authors find that other factors, such as demographic characteristics and program changes, also contribute to the decline. Noncitizen FSP households are less likely to leave the program when the household is larger, and when the head is older, female, and has low levels of education and income. The study results indicate that these demographic characteristics have a slightly stronger effect on citizen FSP households than on noncitizen FSP households. Noncitizen FSP households that live in a nonmetropolitan county are less likely to leave the FSP than those that live in metropolitan counties, and metropolitan status has a stronger effect on noncitizen FSP households than it does on citizen FSP households. The authors also examined whether the frequency with which households must recertify their eligibility for the FSP has a differential effect on noncitizen FSP households. Regardless of citizenship status, the more frequently FSP households must recertify eligibility, the more likely they are to exit the program. However, the effect of a more frequent recertification policy is stronger on citizen FSP households than on noncitizen FSP households.

The study results indicate that restrictions placed on FSP eligibility of noncitizens are responsible for a large share of the decline in their use of food stamps, but that other factors, such as increasing income, also contributed to the decline. This finding implies that noncitizens respond to changes in economic conditions in ways similar to citizens. One notable difference is that residence in a nonmetropolitan county reduces the probability that a noncitizen FSP household leaves the program by more than it reduces the probability that a citizen FSP household leaves the program. This suggests that research focus on whether county-level program administration or economic conditions have different effects on citizen and noncitizen FSP households.