

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of USDA's primary goals is to improve the Nation's nutrition and health. Sound nutrition is essential for physical growth, cognitive development, health, and well-being. To provide a nutritional safety net for children and low-income adults, USDA administers 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that work both individually and collectively to provide participants with food, the means to purchase food, and nutrition education. The focus on nutrition differentiates these programs from other Federal means-tested programs.

Food and nutrition assistance programs vary by size, by type of benefit provided, and by target population. They affect the lives of millions of people. In fiscal year 2006, participation in the Food Stamp Program averaged nearly 27 million people per month, or about 1 in 11 Americans (Oliveira, 2007). During the same year, some 30 million children—over half of all schoolchildren—participated in the National School Lunch Program on a typical schoolday. Meanwhile, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) served almost half of all infants born in the United States and about one-quarter of all children ages 1-4. In total, about one in five Americans participate in at least one of USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs at some point during the year. At a cost of almost \$53 billion in fiscal year 2006—over half of USDA's annual budget—these programs repre-

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sent a significant Federal investment (fig. 1-1).

Because of the importance of the food and nutrition assistance programs to both program participants and taxpayers, sound research is needed to ensure that the programs operate effectively and efficiently. Since 1998, Congress has provided funds to the Economic Research Service (ERS)—the primary source of economic information and research in USDA—to study and evaluate the Nation’s domestic food and nutrition assistance programs. ERS established the Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program (FANRP) to carry out this activity. Using a strong economic framework to guide the research, FANRP has become the premier source of food and nutrition assistance research in the United States, sponsoring over 600 publications on a wide range of topics related to food and nutrition assistance. This report, prepared at the 10-year anniversary of the FANRP program, highlights some of the key research conducted during the program’s first decade.

FANRP—Leading the Way

FANRP’s mission is to conduct “economic research for a healthy, well-

nourished America.” The research is designed to meet the critical information needs of USDA, Congress, policy officials, program participants, the research community, and the public at large. To address the needs of this diverse group, FANRP conducts a multifaceted research plan consisting of both intramural and extramural

research. The intramural program, conducted by ERS research staff, uses the agency’s large research capacity, taking advantage of researchers’ experience and specialized knowledge. At the same time, FANRP funds extramural research, often conducted jointly with ERS staff, that draws on the multidisciplinary expertise of nationally recognized social and nutrition science researchers and the resources of noted institutions such as the National Academy of Sciences, National Science Foundation, National Bureau of Economic Research, Urban Institute, the Brookings Institute, and numerous universities across the country. Through the use of contracts, grants, and extramural agreements, FANRP has funded over 220 extramural projects.

To stimulate new and innovative research on food assistance and nutrition issues and to broaden the participation of social science scholars

FANRP Principles

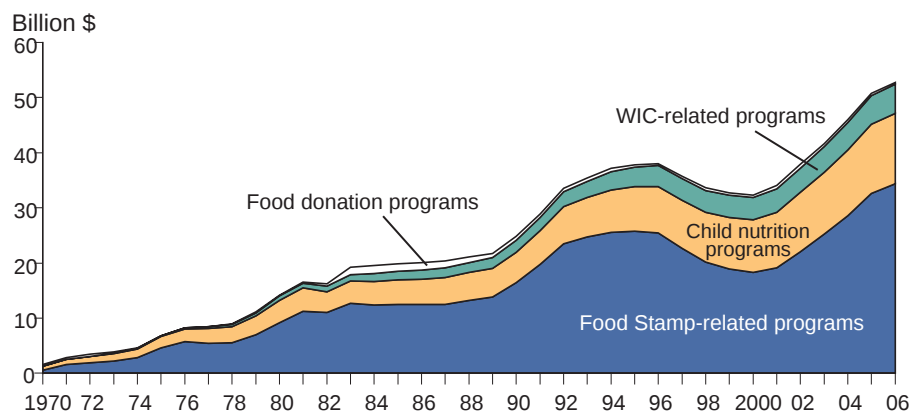
FANRP principles that ensure the reliability, integrity, and usefulness of the program’s research include:

- research that meets the needs of all stakeholders—program participants, USDA, Congress, and the public
- integrated, comprehensive program that conducts research in the broader context of the current and future economic and social environments
- broad array of public and private entities directly involved in the research, evaluation, and review efforts
- integration of ERS staff expertise in the development, implementation, and accomplishment of research projects
- scientifically rigorous studies and evaluations with verifiable and unbiased results
- rigorous internal and external review of research results
- public availability of data
- wide distribution of research findings
- development and maintenance of continuous data sets

Figure 1-1

USDA expenditures for food assistance, FY 1970-2006

Expenditures totaled almost \$53 billion in fiscal 2006



Source: Oliveira, 2007.



Ken Hammond, USDA

in these issues, FANRP sponsors the Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics (RIDGE) program. The program supports both quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore economic, nutrition, and health outcomes of participation in USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs as well as issues surrounding program implementation and delivery. Funded by FANRP, the

RIDGE program is administered through selected universities and their associated research institutes located at five sites across the United States. Each of the five institutions takes a different aspect of food assistance, nutrition, or subgroup of recipients as its primary focus.

FANRP Areas of Research

The three core areas of FANRP research are:

- **Program Outcomes and Economic Well-Being of Participants**—USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs share the main goal of ensuring the health of vulnerable Americans by providing access to a nutritionally adequate diet. Economic factors influence participants' behavior and the degree to which program goals are achieved. The programs also influence the economic well-being of participants through changes in food expenditures; depth and severity of poverty, food security,

and income volatility are also important.

- **Program Access and Economic Determinants of Participation**—USDA seeks to ensure access for all those who are eligible to participate in its food and nutrition assistance programs. The extent to which eligible individuals participate in programs and the factors that influence those decisions are key to measuring how well the program is reaching its target population. FANRP provides economic information on the population being served and on the eligible but unserved population to determine if the program is serving those who are most vulnerable and in need of program resources. Analysis of the economic factors affecting program participation allows policymakers and program analysts to better anticipate and forecast future fluctuations in program participation and can influence budgetary decisions for the program.



- **Program Dynamics and Efficiency** – With increased Federal Government focus on accountability and efficiency, reliable, unbiased information on how the Nation’s food and nutrition assistance programs are administered is increasingly important. An essential objective of FANRP is to provide research to policymakers that improves program operations. As such, FANRP has conducted a number of studies mandated by Congress including the assessment of cost-containment practices and the economic impact of food assistance programs on nonparticipants. Because food and nutrition assistance programs interact with various industry sectors and markets, FANRP also conducts research on how the programs impact food prices, farm income, and rural areas.

Within these three broad long-term topics, priority areas of research are reviewed and selected annually. In developing the annual research priorities, FANRP works closely with USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the agency responsible for administering the Department’s food assistance and nutrition programs. FANRP also seeks input from a broad constituency of policy officials, researchers, practitioners, advocates, industry groups, and service providers. In conjunction with these activities, FANRP sponsors an annual roundtable discussion, open to the public, to identify crucial research and information needs supporting food and nutrition assistance programs and to ensure the policy and program relevance of the annual research agenda.

FANRP conducts comprehensive review of the impacts of USDA’s food and nutrition assistance programs

Prior to FANRP’s establishment, an extensive amount of research had assessed the impact of specific food and nutrition assistance programs on nutrition and health, but there had been no overall assessment of the effects of the programs on the diet and health outcomes of participants. In response, one of the first studies commissioned by FANRP was a comprehensive review and synthesis of published research from over 300 publications on the impact of USDA’s domestic food and nutrition assistance programs on participants’ diet and health. The resulting report—the most systematic and thorough assessment to date of published research on the topic—summarizes what is and what is not known about the nutrition- and health-related impacts of USDA’s food and nutrition assistance programs (Fox et al., 2004). The outcome measures reviewed included food expenditures, nutrient availability, dietary intake, birth outcomes, and other measures of nutrition status. Companion reports resulting from the same study include a review of the research designs available to evaluators for assessing the effect of USDA’s food assistance and nutrition programs (Hamilton and Rossi, 2002) and an evaluation of various data sources for their potential for analyzing the impacts of the programs (Logan et al., 2002).

Dissemination of Research Findings

One of FANRP’s guiding principles is to make all of its research publicly available. FANRP uses a variety of approaches to disseminate research findings to diverse audiences. The award-winning ERS website, www.ers.usda.gov/, is the primary gateway for FANRP products published by USDA. FANRP also publishes research in the ERS periodical *Amber Waves*, and in a variety of peer-reviewed professional journals. FANRP research is also widely presented at policy and program conferences. ERS offers free email notification that provides subscribers with weekly updates on new publications, upcoming conferences, and funding opportunities related to food and nutrition assistance (www.ers.usda.gov/Updates/).

Report Organization

The next three chapters discuss FANRP research that focuses on the main food and nutrition assistance programs: the Food Stamp Program (chapter 2), the child nutrition programs (chapter 3), and WIC (chapter 4). Topics that cut across food and nutrition assistance programs include linkages with the economy (chapter 5), income volatility (chapter 6), and welfare reform (chapter 7). Other topics related to food assistance include food security (chapter 8), childhood obesity (chapter 9), and dietary reference standards and nutrition monitoring (chapter 10). FANRP’s data development activities are discussed in chapter 11, while the summary and future challenges for FANRP comprise chapter 12.