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Objective and Subjective Impediments to the Use of Food Stamps by Food-Insecure Households

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The Food Stamp Program is a mainstay of food-assistance and other welfare programs in the United States. One in 15 Americans (over 18 million people) have benefited from the Food Stamp Program (Nord 2001). The core objectives of the food stamp and related programs are to increase the dietary quality and improve the food security of Americans. The empirical evidence (Cason 2001; Rose, Habicht, and Devaney 1998; Wilde, McNamara, and Ranney 2000) indicates that the nutrient intake of households that receive food stamps are enhanced by the program. Wilde, McNamara and Ranney (2000), for instance, found that food stamp participants consumed more meat, sugars, and fats than they would have in the absence of the program. Food-assistance programs also improve the food security status of the beneficiaries. Nord (2001) used Current Population Survey data to illustrate that the food-insecurity status of low-income households that received food stamps did not change between 1995 and 1999 but food insecurity increased for low-income households that did not receive food stamps, from 23 percent in 1995 to 28 percent in 1999. Gunderson and Oliveira (1998) also found that 58 percent of food-insufficient households receive food stamps and are only 12.9 percent more likely to participate in the Food Stamp Program. An increased understanding of the factors that influence the participation of eligible entities in food-assistance programs is necessary to help improve the delivery and administration of these programs in the counties where they will do the most good.

Participation in food-assistance programs, especially the Food Stamp Program, is necessary in order for such programs to help improve nutrition and decrease the incidence of food insecurity. These implicit benefits of food-assistance programs help

to underscore the considerable interest that policy makers, program managers, and researchers continue to show towards participation in the program. Participation rates in the Food Stamp Program have varied over time. Capps and Randall (1985) found that 25 percent of eligible households from a national sample participated in the Food Stamp Program. The study, based on 1972 to 1973 data, also found that the participation rate for the South was 41 percent. Based on 1991 and 1992 data, Gunderson and Oliveira (1998) reported a national participation rate of 41 percent. McConnell and Ohis (2001) found that the national participation rate in the Food Stamp Program decreased from 71 percent of eligible households in 1996 to 65 percent in 1998. A decrease in participation rates during most of the 1990s was also reported by Wilde et al. (2001), who found that, the number of participants in the Food Stamp Program decreased by 34 percent between 1994 and 1999 (from 27.5 million to 18.2 million participants). The proportion of low-income individuals who participated in the program decreased from 37 percent in 1994 to 28 percent in 1998. Over half (55 percent) of the reduction in participation was found to be due to the decreased use of the program by low-income individuals. Nord (2001) also reports that the proportion of low-income individuals who participated in the Food Stamp Program decreased from 32.2 percent in 1995 to 20.2 percent in 1999. In addition to emphasizing the temporal nature of Food Stamp Program participation rates, most of the above studies also found that participation rates are affected by both macroeconomic and microeconomic variables. Ethnicity, educational level, family status, region, rural status, and other factors were found to affect rates of participation in the Food Stamp Program. The need to advance knowledge and understanding of food-assistance issues continues to exist, especially at the county and state levels where these programs are administered. This need is especially crucial in mostly rural states such as North Carolina that have a substantial number of persistently poor and/or minority counties where the need for food

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This study was funded by the Southern Rural Development Center and supported by the Agricultural Research Program at North Carolina A&T State University.

assistance may be most critical. This study presents survey results of food-insecure households in two North Carolina counties related to their use of food stamps, compares the characteristics of users and non-users of food stamps, and evaluates the reasons why households did not use food stamp as either objective or subjective.

Data and Methods

Several private food-assistance agencies in Guilford and Rockingham Counties in North Carolina were contacted with the question of how many individuals they assist with food in a given week. Based on the responses, the Salvation Army was selected as the best agency because it serves the most people. A survey was administered over a six-week period to users of food assistance in the Salvation Army offices in the cities of Greensboro and Reidsville, North Carolina. The cities are located in Guilford and Rockingham Counties, respectively. The survey was conducted during the summer of 2004. The survey instrument contained questions on the food-security status of the households, income level, age, educational attainment, ethnicity, and others. Selected variables from the survey data were analyzed by use of descriptive and frequency statistics. Representative profiles of food-assistance users were obtained through analysis of the collected data. The response to a question on whether the household receives food stamps was used to categorize the respondents into users and non-users. The characteristics of users and non-users of food stamps were compared. Reasons offered by the non-users for not using food stamps were coded as objective and subjective and assessed based on the characteristics of the respondents.

Results

A total of 171 responses were obtained. The survey results for all respondents and the two categories of food stamp use are presented in Table 1. Over 70 percent of the respondents were in the 25-to-50 age category. Respondents in this category made up 70 percent of food stamp users and about 69 percent of non-users. Only 31.6 percent of the respondents were male, indicating that females are more likely to be food insecure. Food-insecure males are less likely to use food stamps because they make up only 20 percent of the stamp users. African-Americans

made up 66.5 percent of the respondents and about the same proportions—69.4 and 64 percent, respectively—of users and non-users of food stamps. The proportion of other ethnic groups seem in the sample is about the same as their proportions in the user and non-user categories. The incidence of food insecurity declines with educational attainment. Only six percent of the respondents were college graduates, who make up only three percent of the food stamp users. Food stamp use also declined with income. Food stamps were not used by any of the respondents with household incomes of \$20,000 or more. The majority of the respondents live in a house, and about the same proportion is reflected among users and non-users of food stamps, although only about 16 percent of them own or are buying their homes. Some 57 percent of the households do not have any workers in them; such households make up over 70 percent of food stamp users.

Almost 62 percent of the respondents did not use food stamps. Reasons for not using food stamps varied. More than one in three (35 percent) respondents gave subjective reasons for not using food stamps. The reasons offered include the application process is too difficult and long, the value of food stamp benefit is too small for the trouble, lack of knowledge of eligibility, and reluctance to apply. The remaining 65 percent of the respondents who did not use food stamps had objective reasons for not doing so. These include eligibility ran out, waiting for the interview, and application was denied.

Conclusions

A majority of food-insecure households that receive food assistance from the Salvation Army offices are female and do not receive food stamps. Subjective reasons were used by many food-insecure households that did not use food stamps. This could help to explain low participation rates in the food stamp program. Participation rates could be improved if some of the subjective reasons are addressed. This includes making the application process more user-friendly. However, this could be at the expense of rigorous enforcement of eligibility requirements.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Food Insecure Respondents Based on Use of Food Stamps. (%)

Variable	Sample	Non-food stamp users	Food stamp users
Age			
18 to 24 years	11.5	12.12	11.48
25 to 50 years	70.3	68.69	70.49
51 to 70 years	15.8	18.18	13.11
Over 71 years	2.4	1.01	4.92
Gender			
Male	30.6	35.79	20.00
Female	69.4	64.21	80.00
Ethnicity			
White	28	25.51	29.51
African-American	66.5	69.39	63.93
Asian-American/Oriental	1.2	1.02	1.64
American Indian	3	2.04	4.92
Mexican-American	0.6	1.02	0
Puerto Rican	0.6	1.02	0
Education			
Less than 12 yrs	38.9	35.05	43.33
High School Grad.	37.7	36.08	41.67
Some College	17.3	20.62	11.67
College Grad.	6.2	8.25	3.33
Household Income (\$)			
<5000	46.9	38.78	60.34
5001 to 9999	16.9	20.41	12.07
10000 to 14999	11.9	12.24	12.07
15000 to 19999	9.4	12.24	1.72
20000 to 24999	2.5	4.08	0
25000 to 29999	1.9	3.06	0
don't know	10.6	9.18	13.79
Type of Dwelling			
Assisted-living facility	5.9	3.96	9.52
House	42.6	43.56	41.27
Mobile home	10.7	10.89	7.94
Condominium	0.6	0.99	0
Tent	0.6	0	1.59
Rent room or motel	4.1	5.94	1.59
Apartment	27.8	26.73	31.75
Other	7.7	7.92	6.35

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Food Insecure Respondents Based on Use of Food Stamps (%) (Continued).

Variable	Sample	Non-food stamp users	Food stamp users
Home Ownership			
Own or are buying	15.59	19.19	9.84
Rent	77.4	76.77	80.33
Other	6.7	4.04	9.84
Number of Workers in Home			
0	56.8	46.46	70.69
1	31.5	37.37	24.14
2	9.9	13.13	5.17
3	1.2	2.02	0
4 or more	0.6	1.01	0