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Food Stamp Participation and Food Security

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Participation in the Food Stamp Program declined by 34 percent from 1994 to 1998. The strong economy accounts for much of the decline, but national food security survey data indicate that a rising proportion of low-income households either did not know they were eligible for food stamps or found it more difficult or less socially acceptable to get them. Many of these households did not participate in the Food Stamp Program even though they felt that they needed more food.

The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's largest food assistance program and a mainstay of the national nutrition safety net. Even after the recent decline in food stamp participation, about 1 in every 15 Americans, some 18 million people, benefited from the program.

Improved household incomes resulting from the strong economy accounted for much of the decline in the food stamp caseload, as increased employment and higher incomes left fewer households eligible for food stamps (see "Strong Economy and Welfare Reforms Contribute to Drop in Food Stamp Rolls" elsewhere in this issue). However, program participation declined even among low-income

households, most of which were eligible for food stamps. More than half of the overall drop in the food stamp caseload from 1994 to 1998 resulted from the decline in participation by low-income households.

This article takes a closer look at those low-income households. Why do fewer of them receive food stamps now than in the mid-1990's? Do fewer of them feel a need for food assistance? Or do fewer of them receive food stamps—even though they feel they need more food—because they do not know they are eligible for food stamps, or find it more difficult or less socially acceptable to get food stamps? These are questions of some importance to USDA, which is responsible for assuring that food stamps are readily available to all eligible households. States and local communities also want to know if needy households are getting the food assistance for which they are eligible. New national survey data on household hunger and food insecurity shed light on these important questions.

Less Need for Food Stamps or Less Use by People in Need?

The decline in food stamp use among low-income households does not, by itself, demonstrate that people who needed food assistance

found it more difficult or less socially acceptable to get food stamps. An improved economy can also be expected to lower food stamp participation, even among eligible households, by reducing the felt need for food assistance. Eligible households may have more stable incomes, even though still below the eligibility level, and may therefore feel less need for food assistance. The average income of eligible households may have increased, making them eligible for a smaller total food stamp benefit, thus reducing their incentive to apply for food stamps. They may be more confident in their ability to get a job in the near future and may therefore spend down assets or borrow to meet immediate food needs rather than apply for food stamps.

On the other hand, some of the decline in the use of food stamps by low-income households may have resulted from reduced access to, knowledge about, or social acceptability of participating in the program due to changes in the welfare system. Although the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) did not directly affect food stamp eligibility of most recipients (except for a 3-percent reduction in benefit levels resulting from a technical correction in the benefit formula), it may have had indirect effects that reduced food stamp participation. Some families that lost

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cash welfare assistance, or did not qualify to get cash assistance, because of changes under PRWORA did not know they were eligible for food stamps. This finding is consistent throughout several recent studies, including one by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan economic and social policy research organization. Also, it may have become less socially acceptable to receive welfare assistance, including food stamps, as a result of the highly publicized debate over, and changes in, the welfare system.

In addition to these indirect effects, PRWORA reduced food stamp eligibility for most noncitizens and for able-bodied working-age persons without dependents. These changes would have directly affected caseloads of these groups and would account for a small proportion of the overall decline in the food stamp caseload.

These two factors—less need for food stamps because of the improving economy and reduced access to, knowledge about, and social acceptability of food stamps because of welfare reform—both likely to reduce food stamp participation, converged in the last half of the 1990's. Assessing their effects on the food stamp caseload during a period when both underwent considerable change poses a difficult analytic challenge.

Food Security Data May Provide Answers

USDA sponsors an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that collects information about food security, food insecurity, and hunger in U.S. households (see box). The household food security scale calculated from these data is a direct measure of conditions that the Food Stamp Program is designed to ameliorate—food insecurity and hunger. The food security survey also includes questions about partic-

ipation in various food programs, including the Food Stamp Program. Data are available for each year beginning in 1995, not long after food stamp caseloads peaked and before the changes resulting from the 1996 welfare reform act took effect.

The survey assesses the food security status of U.S. households through a series of 18 questions about food-related behaviors, experiences, and conditions known to characterize households having difficulty meeting their food needs. The questions cover a wide range of severity of food stress, from worrying about running out of food, to children going whole days with no

food. Each question specifies that a lack of money or other resources to obtain food is the reason for the condition or behavior, so the scale calculated from the responses is not affected by hunger due to voluntary dieting, illness, or fasting.

Households are classified as food secure, food insecure without hunger, or food insecure with hunger based on their score on the food security scale. "Food secure" households had assured access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life. "Food insecure" households were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, adequate food to meet basic needs at least some time during the year because

How Do We Know How Many Households Are Food Secure?

The statistics in this article are based on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS)—the same survey that provides data for calculating the Nation's monthly unemployment rates and annual poverty rates. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the CPS for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, interviewing a nationally representative sample of about 50,000 households each month. Once each year, following the labor-force interview, the same households are asked a series of questions about food spending, use of food assistance programs, and behaviors and experiences characterizing food insecurity and hunger.

A scale measuring the food security status of each household is calculated from responses to 18 questions about food-related behaviors, experiences, and conditions. The scale locates each household along a continuum extending from fully food secure to severely food insecure (with hunger). Based on their scores on this scale, households are classified into three categories: food secure, food insecure without hunger, and food insecure with

hunger. Examples of the questions include:

"We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?

"The food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?

In the last 12 months did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

In the last 12 months were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because you couldn't afford enough food?

(For households with children) In the last 12 months did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

For a more complete description of how household food security is measured and a list of all the questions in the scale, go to www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/food-security.

of inadequate household resources for food. In households classified as "food insecure with hunger," the level of food deprivation was so severe that one or more household members were hungry at times because they could not afford enough food.

Food security status can be used as an indicator of households' perceived need for food assistance. If most households that were eligible for, but not receiving, food stamps, were food secure, then it may reasonably be inferred that they just did not feel the need for food assistance. On the other hand, if such households were food insecure, and especially if they were hungry, it may be inferred that they did feel a need for more food than they were getting but found it difficult, impossible, or socially unacceptable to obtain food stamps.

Similarly, changes in food security for low-income households not receiving food stamps during the recent rapid decline in the food stamp caseload can help explain why the caseload declined. If food stamp use by low-income households declined because their perceived need for food assistance declined due to improved economic circumstances or other reasons, then the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger among low-income households not receiving food stamps would be expected to remain unchanged or to decline. However, if food stamp use by low-income households declined because getting food stamps became more difficult, or because some of the households were no longer eligible or were unaware that they were eligible, or they felt that food stamps were less socially acceptable, then the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger among low-income households not receiving food stamps would be expected to increase.

Higher Incomes Reduced Number of Eligible Households...

Increasing incomes from 1995 to 1999 reduced the number of households eligible for food stamps and contributed substantially to the decline in food stamp use. The proportion of households with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level declined from 24.2 percent in 1995 to 19.1 percent in 1999. Adjusted for population growth, this reduction represents a decline of 21.0 percent in the size of the low-income, generally food-stamp-eligible, population.

Annual income information available in the data sources used for this article identifies food stamp eligibility correctly for most, but not all, households. Some households with annual incomes above 130 percent of the poverty line were eligible for food stamps during part of the year when their incomes were lower. Conversely, some households with annual incomes below 130 percent of poverty were ineligible for food stamps because they held substantial assets. Also, participation in the Food Stamp Program is underreported in the household survey by about 20 percent. As a result of these two factors, the proportion of low-income households that report receiving food stamps is substantially lower than actual food stamp program participation by eligible households.

...But Food Stamp Use Also Declined Among Eligible Households

Even among low-income households, food stamp use declined by more than one-third from 1995 to 1999 (table 1). Declines were largest for noncitizens (57.3 percent) and for two-parent families with chil-

dren (41.2 percent) and smallest for women living alone (23.8 percent). In percentage points, the decline was largest for single mothers with children (21.0 percentage points). This decline is of particular interest because single mothers with children represented about 40 percent of all low-income households that received food stamps in 1995. Further, this is the group most affected by changes in cash welfare programs and therefore most likely to have had food stamp use reduced by the indirect effects of changes in those programs.

Food Security Increased Because of Higher Incomes...

For the Nation as a whole, food insecurity declined by 1.7 percentage points from 1995 to 1999 (table 2). Food insecurity declined only slightly among households with incomes above 130 percent of the poverty line, and registered a statistically insignificant increase among households with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line. Therefore, the major factor in the overall improvement in food security in the United States during 1995-99 was the declining number of low-income households.

...But Decreased for Low-Income Households Not Getting Food Stamps

By contrast, low-income households not receiving food stamps—the category of primary interest for this study—registered an increase in the prevalence of food insecurity from 23 percent in 1995 to 28 percent in 1999. The size of the increase in the rate of food insecurity for this particular group indicates that many low-income households stopped getting food stamps, or did not

Table 1

Food Stamp Use Declined Sharply for All Types of Low-Income Households Between 1995 and 1999

| Type of household | Households receiving food stamps | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| | 1995 | 1999 | Change | |
| | Percent | Percent | Percentage points | Percent |
| All low-income households (incomes below 130 percent of poverty line) | 32.2 | 20.2 | -12.0 | -37.4 |
| Noncitizens | 33.1 | 14.1 | -19.0 | -57.3 |
| Citizens | 32.1 | 21.0 | -11.1 | -34.8 |
| Two-parent with children | 31.5 | 18.6 | -12.9 | -41.2 |
| Single mother with children | 63.5 | 42.5 | -21.0 | -33.2 |
| Multi-adult with no children | 15.8 | 10.0 | -5.8 | -36.2 |
| Men living alone | 18.2 | 11.2 | -7.0 | -38.5 |
| Women living alone | 21.8 | 16.6 | -5.2 | -23.8 |

Note: Two measures of change are presented. The first is the difference between 1995 and 1999 in the percentage of households receiving food stamps. The second measure, in the last column, is the change in the number of households that received food stamps, adjusting for the change in the total number of households in the category. This latter measure is appropriate for comparing the size of changes across household types.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from CPS Food Security Supplements, April 1995 and April 1999.

Table 2

Food Insecurity Among Low-Income Households Not Receiving Food Stamps Rose Between 1995 and 1999

| Type of household | Food insecurity (with or without hunger) | | | Hunger | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------|-------------------|
| | 1995 | 1999 | Change | 1995 | 1999 | Change |
| | Percent | Percent | Percentage points | Percent | Percent | Percentage points |
| All households | 11.8 | 10.1 | -1.7 | 4.2 | 3.0 | -1.2 |
| Households with incomes above 130 percent of poverty line | 6.2 | 5.6 | -.6 | 1.9 | 1.3 | -.6 |
| Low-income households (income below 130 percent of poverty line) | 31.5 | 32.4 | — | 11.9 | 10.7 | -1.2 |
| Low-income households not receiving food stamps during the previous month | 23.2 | 28.2 | 5.0 | 8.8 | 8.9 | — |
| Noncitizens | 33.3 | 34.2 | — | 12.1 | 9.3 | — |
| Citizens | 22.1 | 27.4 | 5.3 | 8.4 | 8.8 | — |
| Two-parent with children | 26.6 | 32.0 | 5.5 | 6.4 | 6.1 | — |
| Single mother with children | 36.3 | 41.4 | — | 14.9 | 11.1 | -3.8 |
| Multi-adult with no children | 16.8 | 20.9 | 4.2 | 6.3 | 8.3 | — |
| Men living alone | 23.9 | 29.7 | 5.8 | 12.8 | 12.1 | — |
| Women living alone | 16.9 | 19.9 | 3.0 | 6.7 | 8.0 | — |
| Low-income households receiving food stamps during the previous month | 48.9 | 48.8 | — | 18.6 | 17.9 | — |
| Noncitizens | 51.5 | 52.7 | — | 17.3 | 17.7 | — |
| Citizens | 48.6 | 48.5 | — | 18.8 | 17.9 | — |
| Two-parent with children | 49.5 | 52.4 | — | 17.4 | 10.9 | — |
| Single mother with children | 51.3 | 47.5 | — | 19.0 | 15.3 | — |
| Multi-adult with no children | 46.8 | 43.6 | — | 16.7 | 23.6 | — |
| Men living alone | 54.8 | 55.6 | — | 33.8 | 24.7 | — |
| Women living alone | 38.6 | 50.2 | 11.6 | 15.3 | 24.6 | 9.3 |

— = Change was not significant at 90-percent confidence level.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from CPS Food Security Supplements, April 1995 and April 1999.

apply for food stamps, in spite of the fact that they felt they needed more food. This, in turn, suggests that a growing proportion of low-income households did not know they were eligible for food stamps, found it difficult to get into the program, or felt that it was not socially acceptable to do so.

The increase in food insecurity among low-income, non-food-stamp households was widespread, affecting all household types (fig. 1). Among low-income, non-food-stamp households headed by U.S. citizens, increases in food insecurity were substantial and similar in magnitude for all household types except women living alone. Even for women living alone, however, food

insecurity increased by 3 percentage points. This category also experienced the smallest decline in Food Stamp Program participation (table 1), which may explain the smaller increase in food insecurity observed in this category.

Low-income, non-food-stamp households headed by noncitizens had a substantially higher rate of food insecurity than did citizen-headed households with similar characteristics. Noncitizen-headed households, however, registered only a small, statistically insignificant, change in food insecurity from 1995 to 1999. Under PRWORA, many noncitizens became ineligible for food stamps, and food stamp use by noncitizens declined by more

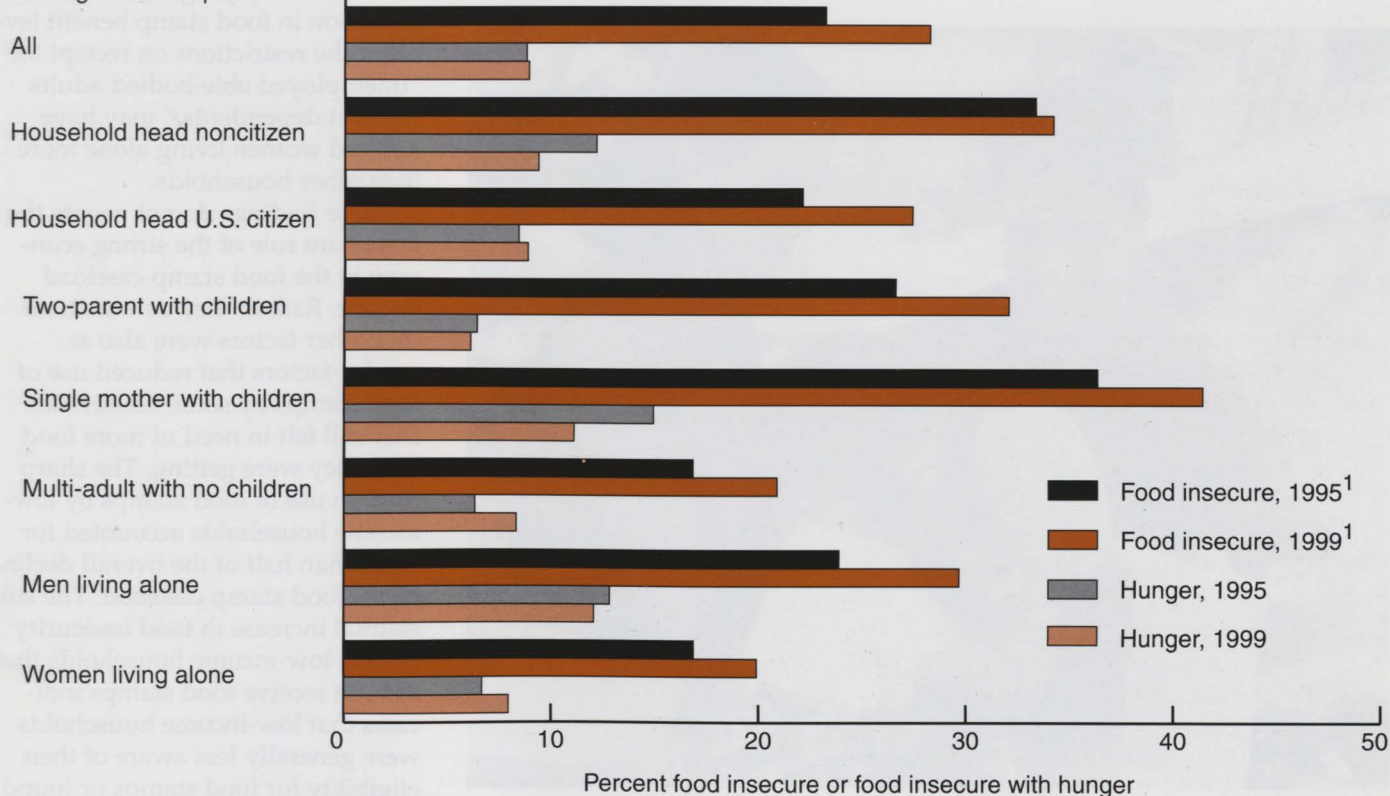
than half from 1995 to 1999. Nevertheless, the lack of any significant increase in food insecurity among noncitizens indicates that the decline in their use of food stamps did not increase their overall level of food hardship. It may be that the improving economy especially benefited noncitizens, who historically have had a stronger attachment to the labor force than citizens with similar characteristics. Further research is needed to understand the important relationships among food stamp use, food security, and employment.

The prevalence of hunger—the more extreme level of food insecurity—among low-income households declined by 1.2 percentage

Figure 1

Between 1995 and 1999, Food Insecurity Increased for Low-Income Households That Did Not Receive Food Stamps

Low-income households not receiving food stamps



¹Food insecure category includes food insecure with and without hunger.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from CPS Food Security Supplements, April 1995 and April 1999.

points from 1995 to 1999 (table 2). Within this low-income category, households not receiving food stamps registered almost no change in the hunger rate. Across demographic categories, changes in the hunger rate were less consistent than changes in overall food insecurity. The largest, and only statistically significant, change in the hunger rate among low-income, non-food-stamp, households was a decline of 3.8 percentage points for single-mother families with children. The combination of widespread increases in food insecurity but little or no change (or even declines) in hunger among low-income, non-food-stamp households suggests that the most needy households—those facing hunger without food assistance—continued to receive food stamps. Even though the prevalence of hunger did not rise among low-income households not receiving food stamps, 8.9 percent of these households did report

hunger at times during the year because they could not afford enough food.

Food Security of Households Receiving Food Stamps Unchanged

Households participating in the Food Stamp Program registered much higher rates of food insecurity and hunger than nonparticipating low-income households. This reflects the greater propensity of households that feel in need of food to apply for food stamps. Households that received food stamps, however, registered almost no change in the measured prevalence of food insecurity or hunger between 1995 and 1999. If the households leaving the Food Stamp Program had been only, or mostly, the less needy households, then a larger share of more needy households would have been left in the

program, and the rate of food insecurity would have increased among food stamp recipients. It appears, therefore, that the shift away from food stamp use occurred somewhat evenly across the “need” spectrum, not just among the least needy households. Analysis of the incomes of low-income households receiving food stamps also points to this conclusion. The average income of these households and their distribution across the income range remained essentially unchanged during the study period.

The one notable exception to this pattern is low-income women who lived alone and received food stamps. For reasons that are not yet clear, both food insecurity and hunger increased dramatically for this category. It is possible that the shift away from food stamp use by women living alone occurred mostly among less needy women, leaving the more needy as continuing food stamp recipients. Also, changes in the food stamp program, such as the reduction in food stamp benefit levels or the restrictions on receipt for “unemployed able-bodied adults without dependents,” may have affected women living alone more than other households.

These findings do not negate the important role of the strong economy in the food stamp caseload decline. Rather, they demonstrate that other factors were also at work—factors that reduced use of food stamps by some households that still felt in need of more food than they were getting. The sharp drop in use of food stamps by low-income households accounted for more than half of the overall decline in the food stamp caseload. The substantial increase in food insecurity among low-income households that did not receive food stamps indicates that low-income households were generally less aware of their eligibility for food stamps or found it more difficult or less socially acceptable to get food stamps in



Two-parent families with children were among household types whose use of food stamps dropped sharply between 1995 and 1999.

Credit: EyeWire.

1999 than in 1995. The lack of a corresponding increase in hunger among these households suggests that use of food stamps by the most vulnerable households remained about constant.

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