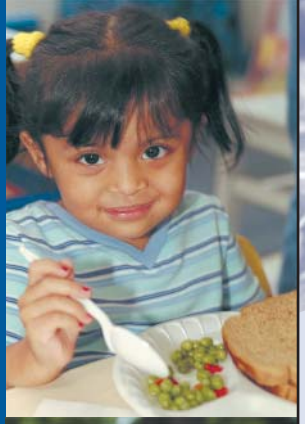

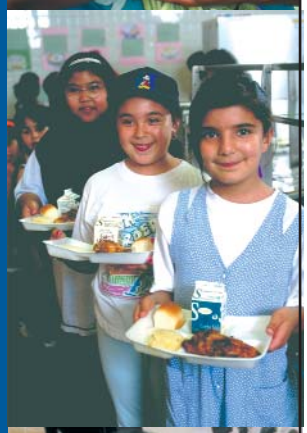

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Patterns of Food Stamp Receipt by Noncitizens in Rural Texas Counties

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Food aid is the centerpiece of our nation's social welfare system, with one out of five Americans receiving some type of nutrition assistance from the federal government [8]. However, not all residents of the United States have access to this assistance. The milestone 1996 welfare reform legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), included a lifetime categorical bar on the receipt of food stamp assistance by most noncitizens entering the United States after 1996. Although recent legislation has rescinded the lifetime ban on noncitizens, most newly arrived immigrants must live in the United States for five years in order to establish food stamp eligibility. As such, many of America's 18.6 million noncitizens have limited access to the nation's nutrition safety net. Within the wider context of U.S. immigration policies, the restriction of essential services such as nutrition assistance has raised questions about our nation's ability and willingness to integrate newly arrived residents into America's broader economic and social structures [2]. The rationale for restrictions on public assistance by noncitizens is expressed in PRWORA's statements about the relationship between immigration and welfare receipt. Title IV of PRWORA voices concerns that welfare use by immigrants hinders self-sufficiency and that the availability of public benefits provides an incentive for immigration to the United States. Thus, even as the U.S. Department of Agriculture endeavors to increase America's food stamp participation rate by 15 percent [7], continuing concerns about welfare dependency have led to the categorical exclusion of most newly arrived immigrants from food stamp assistance.

In this brief, we examine the issue of immigrant welfare dependency through an analysis of food stamp receipt by noncitizens in Texas counties. We begin with a discussion of the demographic characteristics of Texas and their relevance to immigration and welfare use. Next, the results of an analysis of food stamp exit patterns are presented. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings for future polices about immigrant welfare receipt.

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Table 1. Number and Percent of Texas Population and Percent in Poverty (1999) by Citzenship Status and by Metropolitan Status, 2000.*

Category	State of Texas	Metropolitan Central City	Metropolitan Suburban	Nonmetropolitan Adjacent	Nonmetropolitan Nonadjacent
Number of Total Population	20,287,300	13,698,443	3,599,891	2,110,758	878,208
Percent of Total Population	100.0	67.5	17.7	10.4	4.3
Percent in Poverty	15.4	16.4	8.8	18.4	18.9
Number of Native Born	17,410,610	11,352,156	3,292,034	1,960,031	806,389
Percent of Native Born	100.0	65.2	18.9	11.3	4.6
Percent in Poverty	13.9	14.7	8.3	17.2	17.9
Number of Naturalized Citizens	909,216	718,160	115,572	51,175	24,309
Percent of Naturalized Citizens	100.0	79.0	12.7	5.6	2.7
Percent in Poverty	15.8	16.0	7.8	27.7	23.6
Number of Noncitizens	1,967,474	1,628,127	192,285	99,552	47,510
Percent of Noncitizens	100.0	82.8	9.8	5.1	2.4
Percent in Poverty	28.2	28.6	18.8	37.3	33.3

*Percentages might not sum to 100.0 due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau [5,6]

Patterns of Immigration and Food Stamp Receipt in Texas

Almost one of every 10 Texans is a foreign-born noncitizen [6]. Reflecting national patterns, the noncitizen residents of Texas tend to have much higher poverty rates than naturalized citizens. For example, Table 1 shows that for Texas in 1999, 28.2 percent of noncitizens were below the poverty level compared to 15.8 percent of the state's naturalized citizens. This poverty differential is consistent across the state's counties, with noncitizens having the highest rates of poverty regardless of whether they live in metropolitan or nonmetropolitan counties [a]. Table 1 also indicates that poverty levels for all groups are highest in the state's nonmetro counties. For example, while the lowest 1999 poverty rate in Table 1 is 7.8 percent for naturalized citizens in metro suburban counties, the highest rate, 37.3 percent, is almost five times greater and occurs among noncitizens in the nonmetro-adjacent counties. Although noncitizens are more likely than citizens to reside in metro central cities, the poverty rates for rural noncitizens are quite high with more than one in three of these immigrants living below the poverty level.

In spite of higher poverty rates, noncitizen utilization of food stamps is relatively low in Texas. Table 2 presents data for food stamp utilization in Texas by citizen and noncitizen households for 1995 and 2001. In 1995, the 111,007 noncitizen cases represented 12.9 percent of the total food stamp caseload. By 2001, noncitizen usage declined by 72 percent to 31,114 cases, and these represented only 7.1 percent of the total caseload. Table 2 also indicates that for both citizens and noncitizens, caseload decline has been greater in metro counties than in nonmetro counties. For example, noncitizen food stamp cases declined 72.9 percent in metro counties compared to 65.2 percent in nonmetro counties. However, when the caseload declines of citizens and noncitizens are compared, noncitizen caseload decline has been relatively greater in nonmetro counties. Table 2 shows that noncitizen caseload decline in rural counties is 1.78 times greater than that for citizens. This compares to a caseload decline ratio of 1.54 in urban counties. Overall, the food stamp participation rate for Texas is around 47 percent [3], but only about 17 percent of the noncitizen households that are below poverty participate in the food stamp program.

The substantially higher poverty rates of noncitizens suggest that this group faces a high level of food inse-

Table 2. Number, Percent Change and Caseload Decline Ratio for Eligible Texas Food Stamp Caseload Household Heads by Citizenship Status and by Metropolitan Status, 1995-2001.

Citizenship Status	Year	Number	Percent Caseload Decline 1995-2001	Ratio of Noncitizen to Citizen Caseload Decline
All Cases				
Citizen	1995 2001	747,474 409,374	-45.2	
Noncitizen	1995 2001	111,007 31,114	-72.0	1.59
Metropolitan Cases				
Citizen	1995 2001	605,255 319,206	-47.3	
Noncitizen	1995 2001	97,747 26,499	-72.9	1.54
Nonmetropolitan Cases				
Citizen	1995 2001	142,219 90,168	-36.6	
Noncitizen	1995 2001	13,260 4,615	-65.2	1.78

Source:Texas Department of Human Services [4]

curity. Moreover, there are indications that noncitizens face additional barriers to their social and economic integration. Table 3 presents a summary of selected demographic characteristics for citizen and noncitizen food stamp recipients in Texas. Three patterns are apparent in this table. First, Hispanics comprise almost 90 percent of all noncitizen recipients in Texas, and many Hispanic immigrants have limited English proficiency. Second, the educational attainment levels of noncitizens are substantially less than for citizens. Two-thirds of all noncitizen cases have less than a ninth-grade education compared to about one-fourth for the citizen cases. Also, the education levels of both citizens and noncitizens are lowest in the nonmetro counties. Third, in spite of lower levels of human capital, noncitizen cases have higher employment rates than citizen cases, and the 2001 employment rates of rural noncitizens are comparable to those of their urban counterparts.

A comparison of the 1995 and 2001 data in Table 3 indicates that even with the significant caseload declines that followed welfare reform in 1996, the race/ethnicity, education and employment relationships described above have remained relatively unchanged. Thus, both before and after welfare reform, about one in five noncitizen food stamp households has been able to achieve some degree of economic integration via labor market participation, and this has occurred despite barriers such as poverty, language differences and low levels of human capital. Other demographic data (not presented here) show that noncitizen cases have older household heads, larger households, less use of other public assistance programs, and higher earnings than citizen cases.

In summary, the employment patterns and other demographic characteristics described above suggest that many of Texas' noncitizen food stamp recipients fit the profile of the working poor. That is, many noncitizen recipients appear to be underemployed individuals who have incorporated nutrition assistance as part of an overall economic survival strategy. The analysis that follows explores this premise in greater detail.

An Analysis of Non-Citizen Food Stamp Patterns

To further examine the patterns of food stamp utilization by noncitizens, an analysis of caseload exit patterns was done [b]. The analysis uses six

Table 3. Percent Distribution of Selected Characteristics for Eligible Texas Food Stamp Caseload Household Heads in 1995 and 2001 by Citizenship Status and by Metropolitan Status.*

	ALL				METROPOLITAN				NONMETROPOLITAN			
	Citizen		Noncitizen		Citizen		Noncitizen		Citizen		Noncitizen	
Category	1995	2001	1995	2001	1995	2001	1995	2001	1995	2001	1995	2001
Race/Ethnicity												
Anglo	31.3	29.5	2.8	4.4	28.8	26.0	2.8	4.6	41.6	41.8	2.3	3.3
Black	30.9	27.4	1.2	0.8	33.2	29.6	1.4	0.9	21.4	19.7	0.1	0.1
Hispanic	36.8	41.9	89.4	89.3	36.8	43.0	88.4	88.2	36.5	38.1	96.4	96.0
Other	1.0	1.2	6.6	5.5	1.2	1.4	7.3	6.3	0.4	0.4	1.1	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Education Level												
Less than ninth grade	23.4	23.5	66.0	68.8	21.8	22.7	64.7	67.6	30.4	26.5	76.0	75.5
Ninth through 12th grade	27.0	27.2	15.2	15.1	27.1	27.4	15.6	15.3	26.4	26.5	13.0	13.9
High School	38.1	36.7	14.9	12.7	38.9	36.8	15.8	13.4	34.5	36.3	8.8	8.5
Some College	10.7	11.8	3.1	2.9	11.3	12.3	3.3	3.1	8.2	10.2	2.0	2.0
College	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employment												
Unemployed	84.2	84.5	78.0	79.2	84.0	84.8	77.4	79.2	85.0	83.4	82.2	79.3
Employed	15.8	15.5	22.0	20.8	16.0	15.2	22.6	20.8	15.0	16.6	17.8	20.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Percentages might not sum to 100.0 due to rounding.

Source:Texas Department of Human Services [4]

years of monthly food stamp administrative data [c] [4]. The cases analyzed are the citizens and noncitizens that were receiving food stamp assistance in September 1995. In essence, the analysis tracks the same group of recipients (i.e., the September 1995 cohort) for six years and measures the probability that a case will exit the Food Stamp Program during the six-year time period. The noncitizens in the analysis were residing in the United States prior to Aug. 22, 1996, and, as such, were not subject to the categorical ban on immigrant food stamp receipt that was initiated with the passage of PRWORA. As a result, the noncitizens in the analysis are subject to the same program rules as citizens, and, consequently, their exit patterns are not unduly influenced by immigrant restrictions. Also, the cases studied are limited to those where the head of the case is between 18 and 55 years of age, there is at least one dependent less than 18 years old, and the case receives no disability payments (i.e., no Supplemental Security Income). These limitations were imposed in order to focus the analysis on those cases that are most likely to represent the working poor.

The analysis examines factors associated with the probability of an exit during the six-year time frame of the study. In one sense, lower probabilities of exit indicate higher degrees of welfare dependency. For example, a case with a 50 percent probability of exit is more likely to remain in the caseload for all six years than a case with a 90 percent probability of exit.

The analysis shows that when other factors are equal, noncitizens are about 1.25 times more likely to exit the food stamp caseload than citizens. Factors associated with caseload exits include education, income, employment, months of certification and place of residence. The results show that these factors affect citizens and noncitizens similarly, but to differing degrees. For example, citizens with less than a ninth-grade education are 87.5 percent as likely to exit as citizens with a high school educa-

tion. Among noncitizens, lower education also reduces the probability of an exit, but the effect is less. That is, noncitizens with less than a ninth-grade education are 92.6 percent as likely to exit as noncitizens with a high school education. As such, the analysis suggests that, even though lower human capital levels reduce the likelihood of leaving the caseload, the linkage between low education levels and welfare dependency is weaker for noncitizens than for citizens.

The amount of earned income affects citizen and noncitizen cases similarly. For both groups, an increase of $10 per case member per month increases the probability of an exit by 1 percent. Consequently, in terms of exit probabilities, increased earnings reduce welfare dependency equivalently for both citizens and noncitizens.

When employment is examined, the analysis indicates that being employed reduces the probability of an exit. The reduction is greatest for citizens, where employed cases are only 89.7 percent as likely to exit as unemployed cases. For noncitizens, employed cases are 91 percent as likely to exit as unemployed cases. This result seems paradoxical because it suggests that employment increases welfare dependency. However, the data used in the analysis cannot provide information about what happens to recipients after they exit the caseload. Often, exits by unemployed recipients are directly into new employment that raises them above the poverty level. Consequently, the analysis suggests that employed households in the caseload have stable, low paying employment and incorporate food stamp utilization as part of a long-term survival strategy. Regardless of the cause, the analysis indicates that, in terms of exit probabilities, welfare dependency among employed noncitizens is less than that for employed citizens.

> "... the 1996 restrictions on noncitizen welfare receipt appear to have had little if any impact on the volume of immigration into the United States."

The certification period is the number of months of uninterrupted food stamp eligibility. At the end of a certification period, a case must be recertified, a process that typically requires an office visit and extensive documentation by the food stamp recipient. Hence, longer certification periods are associated with lower exit probabilities. The analysis shows that longer certification rates reduce the likelihood of an exit for both citizen and noncitizen cases. Again, however, the effect is less for noncitizen cases. For example, each extra month of certification reduces the probability of an exit by 5.7 percent for citizens but only by 2.2 percent for noncitizens. Thus, in relationship to exit probabilities, the effect of longer certification intervals on welfare dependency is less for noncitizens than for citizens.

Place of residence is also associated with the exit probabilities of food stamp recipients. For both citizens and noncitizens, residence in a rural county reduced the probability of an exit. Nonmetro citizens were 98.4 percent as likely to exit as their metro counterparts. Rural noncitizens were 94.8 percent as likely to exit as urban noncitizens. Of the major factors included in the analysis, rural residence is the only one that suggests a higher degree of welfare dependency among noncitizens. This could be due to a higher prevalence of marginal, agricultural employment among rural noncitizens. That is, to the extent that rural areas have limited opportunity structures, higher levels of economic insecurity among noncitizens could reduce their ability or willingness to exit into higher paying jobs.

To summarize, the analysis indicates that, in terms of exit probabilities, noncitizen food stamp cases in Texas are less likely to be welfare dependent than citizen cases. This finding is relevant for the current policies that restrict the receipt of nutrition assistance by immigrants.

Implications for Policy

Immigrant restrictions in the 1996 PRWORA were premised on concerns that the availability of public assistance hinders self-sufficiency. However, the findings here suggest that, in terms of exit probabilities, the

1995 cohort of working poor noncitizen recipients is less welfare dependent than the 1995 cohort of working poor citizens. Another concern in the 1996 welfare reform legislation was that the availability of public assistance provides an incentive for immigration. Though this issue is not addressed in the present study, the 1996 restrictions on noncitizen welfare receipt appear to have had little if any impact on the volume of immigration into the United States.

Overall, this study finds that in spite of numerous barriers, the 1995 noncitizen food stamp recipients exhibit many characteristics that we associate with the working poor. Though this group of noncitizens had lower education levels than citizens, it also had a higher employment rate than the citizen caseload. Further, the caseload patterns of noncitizens suggest that nutrition assistance is part of an overall economic survival strategy that includes the use of food stamps to offset marginal earnings. This integration of food assistance with employment could be particularly important for both citizens and noncitizens in those rural areas that are characterized by limited economic opportunities.

The lesson in these findings for policy makers is that citizenship status does little to explain patterns of food stamp receipt. Overall, the factors associated with increasing or decreasing exit rates are quite similar for citizens and noncitizens, and, at least for the working poor, there is nothing in the findings to suggest that noncitizens have a higher risk of welfare dependency than citizens. Future policies should strive to balance the goal of immigrant self-sufficiency against the possibility that nutrition assistance might promote the successful integration of newly arrived immigrants and their families into the broader society.

"The lesson in these findings for policy makers is that citizenship status does little to explain patterns of food stamp receipt."

Endnotes

[a] Metropolitan Central City counties and Metropolitan Suburban counties are comprised of what are more typically known as urban counties. These counties are characterized by large, densely populated cores and adjoining suburban fringe areas. Nonmetropolitan Adjacent counties and Nonmetropolitan Nonadjacent counties are more commonly called rural counties. Both of these types of rural counties lack the large and dense population concentrations associated with urban counties. The nonmetro adjacent counties share a contiguous boundary with either a metro central city or a metro suburban county while the nonmetro nonadjacent counties do not. In 2000, Texas had 58 metro counties with 17,691,880 residents or 84.8 percent of the state's population and 196 nonmetro counties with 3,159,940 or 15.2 percent of the total population. This paper alternately uses the terms urban and rural to describe metro and nonmetro counties.

[b] The analysis used event history models. Event history models are a class of duration models that analyze the occurrence and timing of events [1]. The present event history analyses use the proportional hazard or Cox regression models in which the dependent variable is the hazard of a case exiting the caseload. Technically, the hazard function is based on the number of events occurring during an interval of time [1]. Thus, although the hazard rate of an exit is not equivalent to the probability of an event, it can be thought of an expression of the likelihood that a case will exit during a specified time interval. For dummy variables, the hazard ratio tells the ratio of the indicator variable's hazard of exiting to the reference variable's hazard of exiting. For the continuous independent variables (age, household size, income and certification), the results can be interpreted as follows: 100*(hazard ratio - 1) equals the percentage change in the hazard for a one unit change in the independent variable. The Efron method is used to handle ties that occur if two or more observations have identical event times.

In this study, four separate event history models are evaluated: all cases regardless of citizenship, citizen cases only, noncitizen cases only, and mixed noncitizen cases (i.e., a noncitizen case head with one of

more citizen members on the case). In all models, the dependent variable is the hazard or likelihood of an exit for the September 1995 cohort of eligible case heads. As such, the models evaluate the likelihood of a 1995-2001 caseload exit for families that were receiving food stamp assistance in September 1995.

The detailed results of the event history analysis include parameter estimates and hazard ratios for selected variables in the proportional hazard model of spell duration until exit. These results are available from the senior author upon request.

[c] The data files are produced by the Texas Department of Human Services and made available to the Center for Demographic and Socioeconomic Research and Education in the Department of Rural Sociology at Texas A&M University. The files cover the period September 1995 through September 2001 and contain case- and client-level information on recipient demographic characteristics, socioeconomic resources, and program eligibility and participation factors. The event history models use a longitudinal file of case heads and households that extends for a 72 month period from September 1995 through August 2001. The monthly files were combined in quarters, and exits are counted when a case is off the caseload for two consecutive months.

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