

FINAL REPORT

Food Security Status of Non-Profit Food Assistance Recipients in Selected Southern States

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Abstract

The food security status of users of non-profit food assistance agencies was examined using data generated from a sample of 606 participants. Rasch measurement scale and simple descriptive statistics were employed to summarize and analyze the data. Results indicate that most of the users were moderately or severely food insecure with hunger. However, a majority of the clients were not utilizing the food stamp program, even though they appeared to be eligible. To seriously address the problem of food insecurity among low-income households, policies should be designed to encourage non-profit food assistance agencies to assist in identifying needy and food stamp qualified families, and to encourage these families to take advantage of the food stamp program. This will greatly enhance the efforts of the agencies in their quest to mitigate hunger and food insecurity among low-income households.

Introduction

There is an increase in the demand for food from non-profit food assistance agencies such as the food banks, soup kitchens, shelters, and other programs. Duffy et al. (2002), Tiehen (2002), and Nord et al. (2003) have all noted an increase in the demand for food from both private and non-profit food assistance agencies. According to Nord et al. (2003), 89 percent of U.S. households were food secure in the year 2002, while the remaining households were food insecure at least some time during that year. Furthermore, the incidence of food insecurity rose from 10.7 percent in 2001 to 11.1 percent in 2002, while the prevalence of food insecurity with hunger increased from 3.3 percent to 3.5 percent during the same period. The term food security means access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

Economic Research Service (ERS) report indicates that over 34 million Americans, including almost 13 million children live in households that experienced food insecurity in 2002, however the rate of food insecurity experienced varied by different groups. For all US households, the rate of food insecurity was 11.1 percent in 2002, however households with children had a rate of 15.8 percent, households without children about eight percent, and households with children headed by a single woman had over 30 percent rate of food insecurity. When it comes to food security, the most vulnerable are single females, single males, and children (Nord et al., 2003). Furthermore, preschool and school-aged children, who experience severe hunger, have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and internalizing behavior problems than children with no hunger (Weinreb et al., 2002).

The rural South presents a unique opportunity for a better understanding of the food security status of the clients served by non-profit food assistance agencies and its social consequences. Nord et al., (2003) revealed that hunger was more common in the South and the West than in other regions. Therefore, a comparative research in this setting can help delineate the appropriate role of non-profit food assistance agencies in meeting the food needs of local population and in improving the social well being of their clients.

The objective of this study was to assess the food security status of families who use the non-profit food assistance agencies in selected southern states. In addition, urban and rural differences in terms of food security and the socio-demographic characteristics of the households were examined. The results will provide useful insights into the food security status of the clients of non-profit food assistance agencies and the differences

between the urban and rural areas. Such information will be useful in formulating strategies to assist non-profit food assistance agencies in their quest to mitigate hunger as well as assist policy makers in designing appropriate strategies to curb food insecurity among the low-income households.

Review of Literature

Although a large amount of literature exists on food security and non-profit food assistance recipients, little attention has been given explicitly to the study of food security status of non-profit food assistance users in the rural South. Evidence indicates that households with limited resources facing hunger generally turn to federal food assistance programs or the emergency food providers for assistance. Following years of decline, participation in the food stamp program has been on the rise for nearly four years (Liobrera, 2004). In May 2004, approximately 24 million people participated in the food stamp program. Since 2000, participation has increased by 7.1 million or 42 percent. While it is not possible to determine what caused the increase in participation from the data available, Liobrera (2004) argues that it is likely that the majority of the increase can be attributed to the recent economic downturn, which resulted in lost employment and income, making more families eligible for the food stamp program.

U.S. Conference of Mayors (2000), Duffy et al. (2002), Tiehen (2002) and Briefel (2003) have noted an increase in the demand for private and public food aid. Consequently, with the growing demand for food from non-profit food assistance agencies, there is a concern about the efficacy of the safety net in meeting the food needs of low-income populations.

Government agencies, advocacy groups and non-government organizations such as the Second Harvest and the Urban Institute have all conducted food security studies based on national surveys. These national level studies showed that food insecurity and hunger are comparatively more significant among households with children, the elderly living alone, homeless persons, those residing in rural areas and among blacks and hispanics. Rowley, (2000) and more recently Nord et al., (2003) among others, showed that food insecurity among households in the south has consistently been above the national average since 1995.

Data Description

The data for this study was collected using a survey designed to ascertain pertinent information relating to the users of non-profit food assistance agencies in urban and rural areas in the selected states. The states involved in the study are: Alabama, North Carolina and Tennessee. Urban and rural counties based on U.S. Census 2000 were selected either due to convenience or proximity to the participating institution. A list of the food banks' clients in the area was secured, and from this list, 10 centers each were systematically and randomly selected in the four sites where the interviews were conducted. One hundred and fifty surveys (156 for North Carolina) were administered at each site. The interviews were conducted over a three-month period at different days and times during the week. The total, 606 surveys were used in the study. The surveys were administered to users present at the centers at the time of visit, ensuring that they are not interviewed more than once.

Information relating to the household's feeding habits and meals, including household size were solicited. The survey incorporated the 18 questions used to assess

the food security of households in the CPS food security survey (Guide to measuring household food security 2000 and Nord et al., 2002), as well as information on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the households.

Method of Analysis

The 1998 standard metrics scale values for analyzing household food security derived by the ERS using the Rasch software was used to analyze the data. The data was first classified into two groups: households with children and households without children to permit the application of the metric scale values. Based on the number of responses to the items in the “core-module” included, households were classified into the four food security status categories- food secure, food insecure without hunger, food insecure with moderate hunger, and food insecure with severe hunger. The descriptive statistics was then employed to analyze the data and provide a comparative analysis of urban and rural differences.

Definitions of Variables

Descriptive statistics and definitions of the variables used in the analysis are presented in Table 1. The variables; sex, race, home ownership, and food stamp receipts were all dummy variables classified as 1 and 0. Income and age were likert scales, and were converted to continuous variables by taking the mid-point on the scale. Education was measured as an index number with 1, didn't complete high school; 2, completed high school; 3, have some college; and 4, completed college. The number of working family members is the actual number of people working in the family.

The table presents the descriptive statistics of the households for both urban and rural areas. For households with children, 25 percent of the households were males while

in rural areas, 24 percent were males. Twenty percent of the households in urban areas were white, while 42 percent in rural areas were white. The average income in the urban area was \$8,085, while the average income in the rural area was \$10,272. The mean index for education was 2.07 for the urban households and 1.77 for the rural households, indicating higher average education for the households in urban areas than in rural areas. Thirty-two percent of the families in the rural area own or are buying their homes, while only 11 percent are buying or own their homes in urban area. The average age of the head of the households in urban areas was 38 years old, while the average in rural areas was 41 years of age. In urban areas, the number of people working in the families was on the average of .89, while the number of people working per family on the average in rural areas was .83. With regard to food stamps, 54 percent of the families in rural areas were receiving food stamps, while only 30 percent of the families in urban areas were receiving food stamps.

In the case of households without children, 48 percent of the households in urban areas were males and 39 percent of the families in the rural areas were males. Twenty-five percent were white in urban areas and 32 percent were white in rural areas. The average income was \$7,963 for the urban areas, while the average income was \$9,429 for the rural areas. Again average education was higher in the urban area than in the rural area, 2.07 as opposed to 1.84. More families in the rural areas were buying or own their homes than in the urban areas, 36 percent as opposed to 14 percent. The average age of the head of household in the rural areas was 54 years, while the average age of the head in urban areas was 46 years old. The number of working family members was higher on average in this case, .74 as opposed to .54. With respect to food stamps, 30 percent of the

families in rural areas were on food stamp, while 24 percent in urban areas were on food stamps.

Results

Figures 1a and 1b present the food security status of Households with children and Households without children. A total of 338 households had children while 268 families had no children. Figure 1a shows that 64 percent of Households with children were severely food insecure with hunger, 34 percent moderately food insecure with hunger and only two percent were food insecure without hunger. None of the families with children was food secure. Conversely, Figure 1b indicates that 43 percent of the families without children were severely food insecure with hunger, 41 percent were moderately food insecure with hunger, 15 percent were food insecure without hunger and only one percent was food secure. This suggests that families with children were more food insecure than those without children. When child-referenced questions were omitted, there was no much difference in the level of food insecurity between the household with children and those without children. Nord et al. (2003) have noted that when the child-referenced questions were omitted, households with children were 60 percent more likely to food insecure than households without children. The difference in this case may be due to the sample population used in this study.

In Figures 2a and 2b, the rural and urban differences were examined. For the families with children, 189 live in urban areas, while 149 households live in the rural areas. Fifty-four percent of households with children in rural areas were severely food insecure, 45 percent were moderately food insecure, and only one percent was food insecure without hunger. In contrast, 72 percent of household with children in urban

areas were severely food insecure, 25 percent were moderately food insecure, and three percent were food insecure without hunger.

Figure 3a and 3b show the rural and urban differences with regard to food security for households without children. A total of 130 households without children live in the urban areas, while 138 families live in the rural areas. Fig 3a revealed that 45 percent of households without children in rural areas were moderately food insecure with hunger, 34 percent were severely food insecure with hunger, 20 percent were food insecure without hunger, and only one percent was food secure. On the other hand, in urban areas (Fig 3b), 49 percent were severely food insecure with hunger, 41 percent moderately food insecure with hunger, nine percent food insecure without hunger, and only one percent was food secure. Therefore, in both households with children and households without children, the incidence of food insecurity was high in urban areas and in rural areas. In both cases, the chi-square analysis indicated a significant difference at the five percent level or less between the urban and rural areas.

Table 2

In Table 2, reasons proffered by households for not receiving food stamp were examined for both households with children and those without children. The clients not receiving food stamps were asked to choose one reason out of eight possible reasons for not participating in the food stamp program. For households with children in urban areas, about 21 percent of the families indicated that their eligibility had run out, 16 percent said they were waiting for interviews, 15 percent stated that their applications had been denied, 13 percent did not know if they were eligible, about 10 percent did not want to

apply, about seven percent felt that the process was too much trouble, and 1.5 percent indicated that the process was difficult. Another 17 percent indicated “other reasons.” In rural areas, about 19 percent did not know if they were eligible, 16 percent respectively, indicated that their eligibility had run out and were waiting for interviews, about 15 percent applied but were denied, nine percent felt that the process was “too much trouble,” seven percent did not want to apply and about 1.4 percent said that the process was difficult. Again, another 16 percent indicated “other reasons.”

In the case of households without children, in urban areas, 20 percent did not know if they were eligible, about 17 percent indicated their eligibility ran out, 14 percent applied but were denied, 12 percent were waiting for interview, about eight percent stated that the process was too much trouble, five percent did not want to apply and 3.7 percent felt that the application process was difficult. Another 21 percent indicated “other reasons.”

In the rural area, 22 percent did not know if they were eligible, 18 percent applied but were denied, 14 percent were waiting for interviews, 13 percent stated that their eligibility had run out, nine percent indicated that the process was too much trouble, and five percent felt that the process was difficult. Another nine percent indicated “other reasons.”

Table 3

Table 3 presents the descriptive characteristics of the respondents who indicated they were not receiving food stamps. Sixty-four clients indicated that they were not on food stamp because their eligibility had run out. Of those about two percent were food insecure without hunger, 36 percent were moderately food insecure with hunger, and 86

percent were severely food insecure with hunger. None of the respondents were food secure. About 67 percent lived in urban areas, 35 percent were males, 29 percent white, 17 percent were buying or own their homes, and there were .89 working family members on the average in these families. The average income for these families was \$9,400 and the mean education index was 2.0. Those that indicated that the process was too difficult were older in age, 51 years on the average. About 21 percent were food insecure without hunger, 41 percent were moderately food insecure with hunger and 91 percent were severely food insecure with hunger. Also, 53 percent lived in urban centers, 39 percent were males and 26 percent were whites. The average household income for these clients was \$7,934 with a mean education index of 1.94. Thirty-one clients indicated they were not interested in the food stamp program. Of those, none were food secure, 21 percent were food insecure without hunger, 75 percent, moderately food insecure with hunger, and 37 percent severely food insecure. A total of 54 percent lived in urban areas, 48 percent were males, 32 percent white, 48 percent were buying or own their homes. The average age of the head of household was 49 years old, the mean education index was 2.32, and the average income for these households was \$14,259 with .92 working family members. Another 64 clients said that they were not on food stamps because they did not know if they are eligible. Of these households, 24 percent were food insecure without hunger, 38 percent were moderately food insecure with hunger, and 86 percent were severely food insecure with hunger. Fifty-three percent lived in urban areas, 40 percent were males, 28 percent were white, and these families had on the average \$10,379 income per year. The mean education index was 2.01 and the number of working family members was on the average .85. A total of 55 households indicated they were denied.

These households comprised 11 percent food insecurity without hunger, 55 percent food insecurity with hunger, moderate, and 71 percent food insecurity with hunger, severe. Fifty-six percent live in urban areas, 50 percent were males, 23 percent white, and 30 percent owned or were buying their homes. The average income for these families was \$9,981 with mean education index of 2.11. There were on the average, 1.05 working family members. The next category is those waiting for an interview. Of those, 32 percent were food insecure with hunger moderate, and 87 percent were severely food insecure with hunger. Fifty-nine percent lived in urban areas, 29 percent were males, 22 percent were whites, and the average family income was \$9,326. The mean education index was 2.05 with .85 working family members.

Summary and Conclusions

This research examined the food security status of the clients of non-profit food assistance agencies as well as the differences in food security status between the urban and rural residents in selected southern states. In addition, the clients' participation in food stamp program was examined.

The results indicate that majority of the clients of nonprofit food assistance agencies are moderately or severely food insecure with hunger. This finding is consistent with previous findings, Tiehen (2002) and Briefel et al. (2003). Furthermore, the incidence of food insecurity was severe among 64 percent of families with children. When the child-referenced questions were omitted, in contrast to Nord et al. (2003), there was no significant difference in the levels of food insecurity between the households with children and the households without children. This may be due to the sample population used in this study.

With regard to the differences in the urban and rural areas, among families with children, severe food insecurity was higher in urban areas than in rural areas, 72 percent as opposed to 54 percent. Similarly, among families without children, severe food insecurity was higher in urban areas than in rural areas, 49 percent as opposed to 34 percent. Therefore in both cases, the prevalence of food insecurity was more in the urban centers than the rural areas. These relationships were significant at the five percent level or less. For both households with children and households without children, majority of the families were not receiving food stamps, even though it has been observed that families facing hunger generally turn to the food stamp program for assistance. Consequently, to seriously address the issue of hunger among low-income families, policy should be designed to work with non-profit food assistance agencies to identify needy and food stamp-qualified families who are not utilizing the food stamp program and to encourage them to take advantage of the program and its opportunities.

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