

Assessing the Relationship Between Food Insecurity Events and Food Assistance Programs in Two Different Public Housing Communities

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In spite of the long period of economic growth and relatively low unemployment that characterized the U.S. economy over the previous decade, food insufficiency and hunger continue to affect certain segments of the population at the household and individual levels. As food insufficiency is recognized to pose long-lasting challenge to nutrition, health and social policy (as expressed in the Congressional Act of 1990), researchers both at public and private institutions have recently exhibited renewed and growing interest in its measurement and explanation in the context of the United States. This research is part of such an effort. More specifically, this study sought to investigate the prevalence of food insecurity and the temporal relationship between the timing of food hardship and the receipt of food stamps in the context of two types of low-income public-housing communities; traditional and mixed-income. Two study sites, one from each community, were selected for this purpose. They are University Homes (traditional) and Village of Castleberry (mixed-income), both of which are located in the vicinity of Clark Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia (USA). The Basic approach of this study is the USDA Household Food Security/Hunger Module (or more generally the Food Security Core Survey Module (FSCSM)). The module was however modified to reflect a 30-day reference period and to elicit information, among others, on the timing of food hardship and government assistance. The modified survey instrument was then administered (by interview in person) on 322 sample households residing in the two communities. The study found that 48 percent of the respondents were food-secure, with no or minimal perception and experience of food hardship during the reference period. The other 52% were food-insecure, some more so than others, and the percentage declining as a higher degree of food deprivation was considered. The majority of the food-insecure (69%) reported food insecurity without hunger. However, 31% of households experienced hunger, some moderately while others severely (i.e. 11% of the entire sample households). Child hunger was also reported by six percent of the households with children.

The majority of the respondents (61%) reported receipt of food stamps and other forms of government assistance (in addition to housing subsidy) in the month prior to the interview period. Fifty five percent (55%) of the recipients were classified food insecure. By and large, the distribution of non-recipients across the ranges of food security follows a similar pattern. A comparison of the distribution of the three levels of food insecurity of the "recipient" and "non-recipient" sub-samples yielded no significant difference that can be attributed to government assistance. However, government assistance has shown to improve the probability of being food secure as it interacted with living environment, generating greater beneficial effect in the environment of mixed-income housing. Independent of, government assistance, the type of living environment seemed to bear implication for food security condition. Living in mixed-income housing appears to improve the chance of being food secure, even after controlling for certain household attributes and characteristics that might account for the differences of households residing in the two communities.

With respect to the timing of food hardship, the study finds that the number of households experiencing reduced food intake was lowest in the first two weeks and highest during the fourth week of the month. An examination of the timing of reduced food intake and receipt of government assistance reveals the presence of a lagged temporal relationship between the two events. Relatively fewer events of reduced food intake occurred in the first two weeks when the majority of participants reportedly received public assistance. The converse was true in the fourth week when instances of reduced food hardship was the highest and receipts of government assistance the lowest.