

Likelihood of Using Food Stamps during the Adulthood Years

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The Food Stamp Program represents the cornerstone of the federal nutrition assistance safety net. This article estimates the likelihood that Americans will use such food assistance at some point during their adulthood. The probability and duration of food stamp use are estimated for the population as a whole and for differences in race, education, and gender. Based on these food stamp percentages, a lower boundary is also estimated with regard to the life course risk of food insecurity.

Design, Setting, and Analysis: Thirty waves (1968 to 1997) of the nationally representative Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) data set were merged for analysis. Food stamp use is defined as an individual being in a household that has used the Food Stamp Program at some point during the year. Approximately 260 000 person-years of information on food stamp use are analyzed using both life table techniques and logit modeling.

Results: Between the ages of 20 and 65, slightly over half (50.8%) of all Americans will, at some point, receive food stamps. Use of the program takes place over relatively short periods of time but typically recurs at several points in the life course. Race and education exert a profound influence on the odds of program participation. Based on the life course patterns of food stamp use, it is estimated that at least 42% of the American population will experience food insecurity at some point between the ages of 20 and 65.

Conclusions and Implications: The overall life course patterns reveal a substantial need and use of food stamps within the US population. These results also suggest a significant risk of food insecurity across the life course. The implications for nutritionists are discussed.

KEY WORDS: food stamps, food insecurity, life course, poverty, welfare

(*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2005;37:137-146.)

INTRODUCTION

The Food Stamp Program represents the major federal food assistance program available to adult Americans and their families in the United States. Begun in 1964, the impetus behind the program was that

*Congress hereby finds that the limited food purchasing power of low-income households contributes to hunger and malnutrition among members of such households... To alleviate such hunger and malnutrition, a food stamp program is herein authorized which will permit low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet.*¹

The program represents the cornerstone of America's food assistance safety net.² During fiscal year 2002, the Food Stamp Program served approximately 19 million people in an average month, at a cost of 21 billion dollars per year. The average monthly food stamp benefit was \$173 per household.³ Households enrolled in the program have received their benefits over the years through coupons or an electronic debit card, which can then be redeemed for food each month in approximately 146 000 authorized stores throughout the country.³ Understanding the extent to which Americans use the program has been a question of long-standing concern to policy makers and nutrition analysts. This study examines the use of the federal food assistance safety net and the extent of food insecurity in the United States.

Current Knowledge Regarding Food Stamp Use and Food Insecurity

During the past 25 years, participation rates in the Food Stamp Program have averaged between approximately 7% and 10% of the total US population.^{4,5} Those who are more likely to be receiving food stamps include households with children (particularly single-parent families), the disabled, nonwhites, indi-

This research was supported by a US Department of Agriculture-funded research development grant administered through the Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Society for Nutrition Education Annual Meetings, Philadelphia, Pa, July 26-30, 2003.

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viduals with less education, and the unemployed.^{3,6,7} These findings, not surprisingly, mirror the characteristics that have been shown to be strongly associated with poverty.

A second body of work has examined the factors and dynamics related to why eligible households do or do not participate in the Food Stamp Program.⁸⁻¹⁵ Over the past 3 decades, the percentage of those eligible who participate in the Food Stamp Program has averaged between 50% and 60%.^{2,16,17} Policy analysts have attempted to understand why some eligible households do not participate in the program. Research indicated that the factors of awareness and accurate information regarding the Food Stamp Program are critical to participation, along with individuals' attitudes and sense of stigma attached to participating in a means-tested welfare program.¹⁸⁻²⁰

A third focus of research involves estimating the dynamics and determinants of food stamp use.²¹⁻²³ This work has revealed parallel findings to studies that have addressed the dynamics of welfare use in general.²⁴⁻²⁸ Most periods of food stamp use are of fairly short duration, although the likelihood of returning to the program is relatively high. Key factors leading to the use of food stamps, as well as those that predict longer lengths of participation in the Food Stamp Program, include an individual's human capital and economic circumstances (eg, less education, disability status, unemployment) and their household structure (eg, female-headed families with children).

The use of food stamps has also been shown to be strongly associated with food insecurity, which is generally defined as a "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways."²⁹ Food insecurity is frequently measured through an 18-item food security scale developed by the US Department of Agriculture.³⁰ Survey respondents who answer affirmatively to 3 or more of these questions are considered food insecure. The questions include items such as worrying about having enough food to eat, being unable to afford balanced meals, or having to cut or skip meals as a result of not having enough money.

The relationship between food stamp use and food insecurity has been examined over the past decade. As Nord et al pointed out, although "the relationship between food assistance program use and food security is complex... it is the more food-insecure households, having greater difficulty meeting their food needs, that seek assistance from the programs."³¹ Indeed, Nord et al estimated that slightly over half (51.8%) of all households receiving food stamps are also food insecure compared with 10.5% for the overall population.³² Other studies have found approximately the same percentage of food insecurity among food stamp recipients, and some have argued that the extent of food insecurity among food stamp recipients is much higher.³³

Life Course Approach

The body of research outlined above has added much to our understanding of the scope and dynamics of food stamp use

and food insecurity. Yet there is an alternative way of longitudinally conceptualizing and measuring the use of food stamps and food insecurity. This approach places food stamp participation and food insecurity within the context of the life course. They are then analyzed as events that may or may not occur across the life course. The life course study of food stamp use and food insecurity constitutes a fundamentally different approach than either a cross-sectional analysis or an analysis of the length and duration of food stamp receipt.

The concept of the life course has had a long and distinguished history within the social and applied sciences.³⁴ It has proven to be an extremely helpful tool in thinking about the manner in which individual lives unfold. The term itself refers to "social processes extending over the individual life span or over significant portions of it, especially [with regard to] the family cycle, educational and training histories, and employment and occupational careers."³⁵ Yet as Settersten and Mayer pointed out, "While these dimensions describe the primary activities across life, a more complete picture of the life course must also include more marginal periods and events—such as brief periods of training, second or part-time jobs, periods of unemployment or sickness."³⁶

The current article builds on our earlier work detailing the life course risk of poverty. These results indicated that during adulthood, two thirds of Americans will experience at least 1 year in poverty.³⁷ Households falling below the poverty line do so for generally 1 or 2 consecutive years. However, once an individual experiences poverty, they are quite likely to encounter poverty again. This body of research has empirically estimated the magnitude and approximate level of risk faced by Americans in terms of being poor. The analysis in this article is intended to build on the conceptual and methodological foundation established in this earlier body of work by calculating the extent to which Americans will turn to the federal nutrition assistance safety net during their working-age adulthood years.

The objectives of this article are to first construct a series of life tables (based on data from 1968 through 1997) that will provide the cumulative percentages of the nonimmigrant American population using the Food Stamp Program between the ages of 20 and 65 years. We also calculate the total and consecutive number of years that individuals will use the Food Stamp Program across the life course. Next, we analyze the effect that race, education, and gender have on altering these percentages. We examine both the bivariate and multivariate effects of these 3 variables on the cumulative likelihood of using food stamps. Finally, based on our food stamp estimations, we provide a lower estimate of the likelihood of food insecurity across the life course (based on the assumption that half of food stamp recipients are concurrently food insecure).

METHODS

Data Set

The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) is a nationally representative, longitudinal sample of households and

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