

Food assistance in America

Judith Bartfeld

Judith Bartfeld is Professor of Consumer Science in the School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Specialist with University of Wisconsin–Extension, and Director of the IRP RIDGE Center for National Food and Nutrition Assistance Research, established in January 2010 by the Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service.

Over the past decade, enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) more than doubled, from under 19 million per month in 2001 to over 46 million currently. In recent years these increases have occurred in tandem with an unprecedented rise in the rate of food insecurity.¹ The food insecurity rate jumped from 11.1 percent in 2007 to 14.6 percent in 2008, with the start of the Great Recession, and has remained at or near 14.6 percent since then.

The spike in food insecurity, and the dramatic growth in SNAP caseloads (and to a lesser degree growth in the caseloads of other federal food programs, such as school meals) has led to growing research and policy interest in the role and impact of these programs. This has occurred amidst a parallel growth in interest regarding the availability of supermarkets and other food outlets, or a household’s “food environment,” and the extent to which that environment supports or constrains access to sufficient and nutritious foods.

The following four articles explore a range of cutting-edge issues related to SNAP, food insecurity, and food environments, as well as the intersections among them. Collectively, these articles examine the determinants of the increase in SNAP over the past decade; the effect of SNAP receipt on poverty rates; the role of the retail food environment in contributing to food security; and the extent to which farmers’ markets are able to alleviate food deserts and strengthen low-income households’ food access.

In the first article, Janna Johnson examines the reasons underlying the unexpected increase in SNAP beneficiaries during the 2003 to 2007 recovery—a period in which caseloads increased by more than 20 percent, even though economic models based on past trends predicted a decline. She explores various potential explanations, including changes in the share of people who are eligible, changes in the rate at which people enter the program, and changes in the length of time beneficiaries remain on the program. She also explores the role that policy changes may have played in the unexpected caseload increase.

In the next article, Mark Levitan and Daniel Scheer estimate the impact of SNAP receipt on poverty rates in New York City from 2007 through 2009. Because the official poverty measure does not consider the value of SNAP or other forms of non-

cash income, the authors use an alternative poverty measure, conceptually similar to that proposed by the National Academy of Sciences, which is based on a more comprehensive income accounting. Their work contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to document the impact of food assistance on poverty rates and other measures of economic hardship.

The third and fourth articles both focus on the food environment—one looking at traditional retail food outlets and the other focusing on farmers’ markets. While food environments are an increasing focus among researchers and policymakers, little is known about the role they play in contributing to food security. Alessandro Bonanno and Jing Li’s study considers whether a higher density of retail food outlets reduces the risk of food insecurity. They consider several different types of outlets, including medium and large traditional grocery stores, small food stores and convenience stores, and Walmart supercenters. They also examine whether households with children are particularly influenced by their access to food outlets. This study is among the first efforts to document the relationship between food environments and food security outcomes.

Whereas Bonanno and Li focus on traditional food outlets, Vicki McCracken, Jeremy Sage, and Rayna Sage are particularly interested in the role of farmers’ markets. Looking in detail at the distribution of such markets in Washington State, they examine whether the placement of markets helps to alleviate food deserts—that is, areas of high poverty and low food access—or whether markets tend to perpetuate existing patterns of food access. They further explore whether markets in various locations allow consumers to use SNAP and other food assistance benefits. Although their study is focused on a single state, it helps shed light on some of the successes and challenges in using farmers’ markets to enhance food access for low-income populations.

The four articles are summaries of research projects funded in the first year of IRP’s RIDGE Center for National Food and Nutrition Assistance Research. With support from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the RIDGE Center funds innovative research related to food assistance programs, and provides mentoring to scholars in the food assistance area. Through its work, the Center seeks to shed light on the successes and challenges of food assistance programs, as those programs play an increasingly central role in the social safety net. ■

¹The terminology used by the USDA to describe “food insecurity” changed in 2006, following recommendations by an expert panel convened by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies. The CNSTAT panel recommended that “food insecurity” be defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to food; that an explicit distinction be made between food insecurity and hunger; and that “hunger” be defined as an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. See the USDA’s website for further details: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx#ranges>.