

Food Security, Hunger and Food Stamp Participation among Low-Income Working Families in Rhode Island

Kathleen S. Gorman, PhD, Kelly D. Horton, MS, & Robert F. Houser, PhD
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Abstract

In 2004, almost 12% of all U.S. households, and about one in three low-income households (36.8%) were food insecure (1). While the Food Stamp Program (FSP) is intended to provide a safety net for low-income households to purchase food, recent data indicate it reaches only about 55% of those eligible (2). The purpose of this study was to examine one specific group of underserved, the working poor, in order to assess the reasons why income-eligible households do or do not participate in the FSP. Participants were selected based on their income (between 100 and 130% of the federal poverty level) and FSP participation (divided proportionately) from a larger pool of working families receiving state subsidized child care assistance in Rhode Island. Individuals from 418 low-income households were surveyed regarding household demographics, participation in food assistance programs (Food Stamps, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch (NSL) and School Breakfast), food security and hunger, and child well-being. Results indicate that more than half (56%) of the low-income working families were food insecure over the past year and close to 20% of households had members who experienced hunger. Further, households participating in the FSP were more disadvantaged than those not participating. Households receiving FSP benefits had lower incomes, higher rates of food insecurity, and more reported difficulties with their children, despite greater use of other food assistance programs. Finally, participation in all of the nutritional assistance programs was low relative to estimated eligibility. The findings highlight the difficulties of working families, who despite employment, and in many cases, nutritional assistance, were still experiencing hunger and food insecurity in unacceptably high percentages.