IRP-RIDGE 2012–2013 Research Project Summary

Food Assistance During and After the Great Recession in Metropolitan Detroit

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Economic shocks produced by the Great Recession have contributed to rising food insecurity, with 14.7 percent of U.S. households being food insecure in 2009, compared to 11.1 percent in 2007. At the same time, SNAP caseloads increased by nearly 60 percent since 2007 and the program now reaches more than 40 million persons. Nonprofit food pantry use also increased during the Great Recession, with an estimated 37 million persons using charitable food programs in 2009. Financial hardship has increased as well in recent years due to the economic downturn, placing greater importance on understanding the connections between food assistance, food security, and other types of material need.

Using data from the first two waves of the Michigan Recession and Recovery Survey (MRRS), a unique panel survey of a representative sample of working-age adults in the Detroit Metropolitan Area, this project explores three research questions related to the receipt of SNAP among low-income households: How have low-income families in the Detroit Metropolitan Area bundled SNAP with other types of public assistance and help from charitable nonprofits in the wake of the Great Recession? When controlling for economic shocks and respondent characteristics, to what extent is access to local food assistance resources related to receipt of SNAP and charitable nonprofit food assistance? How are receipt of SNAP assistance and economic shocks related to household food shopping behaviors and food security?

Data for this project comes from the first two waves of the Michigan Recession and Recovery Survey (MRRS), which gathers detailed information about employment history, income sources, food security, safety net program participation, private social support, material hardships, health and mental health, grocery shopping habits, and basic household demographics from a representative sample of households with adults aged 19 to 64 years living in the three-county Detroit metropolitan Area. Wave 1 of the MRRS completed hour-long in-person interviews between late October 2009 and March 2010 with 914 adults between the ages of 19 and 64 (response rate of 82.8 percent). The second wave (also hour-long in-person interviews) was completed between April and August 2011 with 847 respondents (response rate of 93.9 percent). Information about the residential location of each MRRS respondent is used to assess household proximity and accessibility to a number of different food assistance and retail resources: SNAP administrative offices; food pantries; SNAP authorized retailers; and food retailers as reported by InfoUSA marketing data. In doing so, this study is in a unique position to connect household-level food outcomes (i.e., program participation, food security, grocery shopping habits) to the local food resource infrastructure with a precision not found in most published food policy research.

FINDINGS

Several important findings emerge from this project that should be of interest to scholars, policymakers, and advocates. First, food insecurity is quite prevalent among poor and near-poor households in metro Detroit.
following the Great Recession. Fifty-one percent of households below the federal poverty line were food insecure in the year prior to the Wave 1 survey. Consistent with recent research findings that food insecurity is more prevalent among non-poor populations than is commonly realized, 36.3 percent of households with income between 100 to 200 percent of the federal poverty line and 33.4 percent of households with income between 200 to 300 percent of federal poverty were classified as food insecure in the twelve months prior to Wave 1. Perhaps reflecting effects of the economic recovery, the prevalence of food insecurity declined slightly between waves of the MRRS. Nevertheless, more than 40 percent of poor households and about one-third of near-poor households were food insecure in Wave 2.

Nearly 70 percent of Wave 1 households with income below the poverty line report receiving SNAP benefits at some point in the prior year, compared to 27.9 percent of households with income between 100 and 200 percent of federal poverty. Receipt of charitable food assistance is less common among poor and near-poor households in Detroit than is receipt of SNAP. About one-third of poor households report receiving charitable food assistance and less than 15 percent of households between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty report receiving help from nonprofit charities. As might be expected, we find that households experiencing periods of unemployment and detachment from the labor force due to work limiting health conditions are more likely to receive public and private food assistance than households that do not experience spells of unemployment or detachment from the labor force.

This study also finds evidence that low-income households receiving SNAP reside closer on average to both SNAP administrative offices and food pantries than low-income households that do not receive SNAP. There also is some evidence that poor households receiving SNAP are located slightly closer to SNAP retailers and chain grocery stores than poor households not receiving SNAP. In contrast to expectations from some of the existing literature on food deserts, however, we find that poor households in Detroit on average are slightly closer to the nearest SNAP retailer, SNAP grocery store, or chain grocery store. Differences in spatial access to food assistance program resources (e.g., SNAP offices or food pantries) is found to be associated with increased likelihood that a household receives assistance, even after controlling for relevant demographic and economic factors. For example, being within 1 mile of a SNAP administrative office increases the likelihood of receiving SNAP assistance by about one-third over the baseline case where the household is more than a mile away from a SNAP office.

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