

**Highlighting New  
Poverty Research****by Colleen Heflin and  
James P. Ziliak**

“Food Insufficiency, Food Stamp Participation, and Mental Health,” published in *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 89, Issue 3, July 2008

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**Food Insufficiency, Food Stamp Participation,  
and Mental Health**

**Background.** In 2007, 11 percent of American families did not have sufficient food at some point during the year. Among other harmful effects, not having sufficient food may have negative consequences for mental health either from direct nutritional deficiencies or through psychological distress associated with recognizing one's disadvantage. The Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program that provides millions of families with access to food if they meet income and asset limits, reducing food insecurity among recipients. Although it might seem as though receiving food stamps would also contribute to better mental health, there are several reasons that receiving food stamps might impact mental health negatively. For example, applying for the program and proving eligibility can require long visits to social service offices. Receiving food stamps could also create negative feelings related to the stigma of receiving public assistance.

**Methods.** Using longitudinal data from the 2001 and 2003 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, West Coast Poverty Center Western Poverty Scholar Colleen Heflin and colleague James P. Ziliak explore the relationships between food insufficiency, receiving food stamps, and mental health among a representative sample of over 4,400 households headed by an adult aged 18-65 as well as among subsets of household heads with low-education, female-headed households, and those who appear to be eligible for food stamps. Further, the researchers ask if self-reported levels of emotional distress (e.g., feelings of sadness, nervousness, restlessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness) vary between food-insufficient individuals who receive food stamps and those who do not receive food stamps after controlling for other characteristics that might affect mental health. The authors use a fixed-effects model to control for unobserved heterogeneity and explore whether the effect of food stamp receipt on emotional distress varies with the amount of food stamps received or with the start of receipt of food stamps.

**Findings.** Descriptive statistics show that measures of emotional distress were higher among those with low levels of education (3.6 on a scale of 24), female-headed households (4.1), and food stamp-eligible households (4.8) than among the full sample (3.2). Levels of food insufficiency were also higher among the low-education group (3 percent), female-headed households (3 percent), and food stamp-eligible households (8 percent) compared with the full sample (2 percent). Among the full sample, 7 percent received food stamps, compared with 37 percent among those estimated to be eligible for food stamps. The average food stamp benefit received was roughly \$270 per month among the full sample.

The multivariate analysis shows that food insufficiency was positively and significantly associated with emotional distress among the full sample and all of the subsamples. Receiving food stamps did not have a moderating effect on emotional distress in the full sample. However, the effect of food insufficiency on emotional distress did vary between those who received food stamps and those who did not. Controlling for the food stamp benefit amount, individuals who received food stamps experienced greater emotional distress associated with food insufficiency than non-recipients. Additionally, among the full sample and the low-education sample, food insufficient individuals who received higher food stamp benefits experienced greater emotional distress associated with food insufficiency than non-recipients. The negative effects of food stamp receipt also vary by whether or not benefits were received over the long-term. Increases in emotional distress were found among those who had received food stamps for short periods of time but were absent among those who had received food stamps for longer periods.

These results provide additional evidence that food insecurity is associated with poor mental health outcomes. However, they also suggest that the transition onto food stamps may be difficult for some food-insecure individuals even as food stamps address the problem of food insecurity. Additional research is needed to determine what it is about this transition that contributes to negative mental health outcomes.

# Poverty Research Flash

**The West Coast Poverty Center** serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

## Poverty Research Flash 2009-04

### Food Insufficiency, Food Stamp Participation, and Mental Health

New research from Colleen Heflin and James P. Ziliak

#### Key Findings

- Among a nationally-representative sample of over 4,400 households, levels of food insufficiency were higher among those with low education (3 percent), female-headed households (3 percent), and food stamp-eligible households (8 percent) compared with the full sample (2 percent).
- Measures of emotional distress also were higher among those with low levels of education (3.6 on a scale of 24), female-headed households (4.1), and food stamp-eligible households (4.8) than among the full sample (3.2).
- Among the full sample, 7 percent received food stamps, compared with 37 percent among those estimated to be eligible for food stamps. The average food stamp benefit received was roughly \$270 per month among the full sample.
- Controlling for the food stamp benefit amount, individuals who received food stamps experienced greater emotional distress associated with food insufficiency than non-recipients. Increases in emotional distress were found among those who had received food stamps for short periods of time but were absent among those who had received food stamps for longer periods.