

HOW FEDERAL AND STATE FOOD STAMPS PROGRAMS AFFECT RECENT IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES

by Heather Koball, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University

“Food insecurity” is defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a lack of consistent access “to enough food for an active, healthy life.” This kind of insecurity can be measured either for entire households or for only children in affected households. According to the most recent data available, food insecurity affects 16.5 percent of all households with children, and 6.5 million children experienced food insecurity in those households. Food insecurity can harm children’s health, development, and psychological well-being. Children experiencing this form of deprivation may be in poor health or underweight, and young children affected by food insecurity may fall behind developmental milestones.

Children of immigrants are at greater risk of going without enough food than the children of native-born citizens – even when income levels and other economic factors are taken into account. Immigrant families often experience economic hardships, of course, but their food insecurity may also be traced to U.S. federal and state policies that make some immigrants ineligible for food stamps.

Food Stamps and Immigrant Status

The Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program – previously called food stamps and still widely known by that name – is designed to provide low-income households with financial support to purchase enough food for a nutritious diet. For most people in the U.S. general population, eligibility for food stamps is determined by the household’s income and assets. Although state governments have some flexibility in expanding food stamp eligibility beyond federal standards, families can generally get help from food stamps if they have household gross incomes below 130 percent of the poverty level – a level of earnings in 2017 equal to roughly \$31,980 for a family of four. In fiscal year 2015, the federal government spent \$75 billion on food stamps benefits going to 45 million people. In that year, nearly 41 percent of food-insecure households reported receiving food stamps.

However, non-citizen immigrants are less likely to be eligible for food stamps than either native-born or immigrant citizens. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act – known as “welfare reform” – made most legal immigrants ineligible for this benefit. In 2002, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (the 2002 Farm Bill) reversed some of these restrictions, restoring food stamp eligibility starting in April 2003 to all documented immigrants who had lived legally in the United States for at least five years and to all legal immigrants under age 18 effective October 1, 2003. However, legal adult immigrants who have lived in the United States for five years or less remain ineligible for federally funded food stamp benefits.

After the 2002 federal change, seven states – California, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, Washington, and Wisconsin – used state-funded food assistance programs to provide some support to some immigrants who were not covered by the federal food stamps program. We refer to these states as inclusive states. In general, their programs extended state-funded benefits to legal adult recent immigrants during their first five years of residence in the United States. Our research team has examined whether state-funded food assistance has effectively served households headed by recent immigrant parents and reduced their food insecurity.

Program Coverage for Recent Immigrants in Various States

Our study compared the rates of receiving food assistance, the amount of benefits, and the levels of food insecurity among recent immigrant households with children relative to longer-term immigrant households with children. We asked whether recent immigrant households were better off in the inclusive states that filled gaps in the federal food stamps program compared to exclusive states that did not fill the federal gap affecting the first five years of residence. Data for our analysis came from surveys conducted from 2003 to 2010 and from the Food Security Supplement of the Current Population Survey. Data included measures of food security in immigrant households and their participation in food stamp programs. We focused on the years after the 2002 Farm Bill, because since then federal food stamp eligibility requirements for immigrants have remained consistent – with legally documented immigrants in inclusive states eligible for help during the first five years that was not available to their counterparts in the other states. We accounted for a range of social and economic characteristics of the households in order to determine the potential causal effect of state policy on three outcomes: food stamp receipt, food stamp benefit amount, and food insecurity.

How Additional State-level Benefits Help Immigrant Households

Our analysis showed that households of recent immigrant parents who live in inclusive states were more likely to receive food stamp benefits than households of recent immigrant parents in exclusive states. Recent immigrant households also received more food stamp benefits, perhaps because in inclusive states more household members are eligible for these benefits compared to members of immigrant households in exclusive states. Did greater eligibility for food stamps reduce hunger? We found that food insecurity was lower among recent immigrant households in inclusive states, but this finding did not reach the level of statistical significance.

More research remains to be done on the potential impact on families and children of varied food stamp policies. Currently, 17.8 million children live in the United States with at least one non-citizen immigrant parent and 7.5 million live with two such parents. Recently, some states have dropped inclusive programs, but as of 2016, five states – California, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, and Washington – still provide state-funded food stamps to recent, legal adult immigrants. No state provides food stamp benefits to unauthorized adult immigrants.

Our research suggests that families headed by legal immigrant parents who recently moved to the United States are more likely to receive food stamp benefits (and more generous benefits) if they happen to live in the inclusive states. Indications are that receiving such benefits reduces food insecurity for these fortunate immigrant families – which may very well allow their children to flourish in ways that benefit everyone in America.

Read more in Heather Koball, "[Food Insecurity and SNAP Use Among Immigrant Families with Children During the Economic Downturn](#)," report for the USDA's Economic Research Service, (2013).