

“Assessing Obstacles to Food Stamp Recertification: What Prevents Hunger Prevention?”

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Introduction

Each year, millions of low income families in the United States experience hardships related to hunger and food insecurity. In 2006, over 12.6 million households, or 35.5 million individuals, reported experiencing food insecurity and nearly 4.6 million households reported hunger (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson 2007). When compared to food secure households, households experiencing food insecurity have significantly higher odds of reporting poor/fair health, having poor functional health, restricted activity, multiple chronic conditions, suffering from major depression and distress, and of having poor social support (Vazoris & Tarasuk 2003, Hampton 2007, Tanner & Stevenson 2002, Cook et al. 2003). Recent estimates indicate that 12.1% of households in Rhode Island experience food insecurity and 4.2% experience hunger. These percentages translate into approximately 120,000 individuals in Rhode Island living in households with uncertain availability or access to sufficient nutritious foods.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Federal Food Stamp Program (FSP) is designed to help low income individuals and families receive a more nutritious diet by supplementing their income with food stamp benefits. The FSP is an entitlement program, meaning that all eligible applicants will receive benefits (Food and Nutrition Services, 2008). In the fiscal year 2006, 26.7 million people in 11.7 million households received Food Stamp Benefits (FSB) in the United States (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson 2007). Many of these households were working households, the majority of which did not receive concurrent welfare benefits.

After an initial decline in Food Stamp Program participation in the mid 1990s, participation started to increase nationally in 2002 currently averaging about 60% of those eligible enrolled in the program. Reasons for low participation rates include general lack of knowledge regarding program availability as well as the lengthy application process (Robertson 2001, USDA 2003). However, Rhode Island FSP participation rates are low relative to estimated eligibility, with recent data indicating that only 57% of the estimated eligible population is actually enrolled in the FSP (Caster & Shirm 2003).

To address problems of participation and recertification, Rhode Island developed a state Food Stamp Outreach plan in 2002 and since then has subcontracted with the URI Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America to implement an Outreach Project aimed to increase participation in the FSP. The goals of the Food Stamp Outreach Project include decreasing stigma, increasing access, and identifying particular barriers to participation. Of particular interest here is that one of the recent obstacles identified is the failure of participants to recertify – that is, most participants are required to recertify every 6 months, with approximately 900 clients being lost to recertification each month.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons why eligible households in Rhode Island fail to recertify for Food Stamp Benefits, when enrollment in these benefits could presumably alleviate some of the burden of food insecurity.

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 2,213 previously eligible individuals who had failed to recertify for benefits within the previous 30 day period. Phone numbers and household information (name of head of household, city of residence, whether or not at least one member of household was elderly or disabled) was provided to the Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America by the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (RIDHS).

Procedure

Three rounds of data were provided by DHS, one for each month over which the study was conducted: February, March, and April, 2008. After receiving the data, all non-English speaking households, as well as all households without telephones, were removed. Households with phone numbers were divided into four groups (each to be called by one of the four IRB-certified researchers on this project). The researchers called each household a minimum of 3 times, with 602 households in February, 607 for March and 609 for April. Researchers assured each participation that their personal information and answers would be kept strictly confidential.

Instrument (Survey)

Telephone interviews were based on an original survey designed by our research team. The survey asked several questions aimed at identifying problems specific to the recertification process. Survey questions included asking individuals whether they were currently receiving Food Stamps, and whether they had received mail from the RIDHS informing them of their food stamp and recertification status.

Additionally, survey questions included whether the individual had been assigned an interview date with DHS and if they had attended that interview. If they had not attended, they were asked the reason. Individuals who had not recertified for Food Stamp Benefits were also asked, “What was the main reason you did not recertify?” If the client expressed confusion and/or difficulty in the application process, an outreach worker was instructed to ask, “Was there anything that could have helped you in completing the application?” During the interviews, responses to questions were recorded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Ability to contact participants



A major portion of the numbers (38%) for eligible individuals (English-speaking only) provided by DHS were unable to be contacted due to wrong or disconnected telephone numbers (Figure 1). An additional 29% of calls were never answered and thus could not be verified. Ultimately, researchers were only able to speak directly with 23% of potential study participants. Of those who were able to be reached, 80% agreed to participate in the survey.

Participants' most common response for not recertifying was that they no longer needed/wanted benefits, followed by scheduling conflicts with DHS (Table 1). These two responses made up for 35.45% of the total responses, compared to the next most frequent response (participant thought he/she was no longer eligible) at 9.36%.

The reasons provided by participants for missing an interview were similar to the reasons for not recertifying (Table 2). Again, the most common response for missing an interview was that the participant no longer need/wanted benefits (15.9%). Some participants also stated that they missed the interview because they believed they were no longer eligible for benefits (13.3%), or because of scheduling conflicts (12.4%). Another 10.6% missed their interview due to transportation issues. Approximately 6.2% were unable to attend their interviews due to extenuating circumstances.

When asked the final survey question “what could have made the recertification process easier,” 46% participants stated nothing, although there were many other answers as well. Many of these respondents had already stated that they no longer wanted to receive benefits, therefore changes in the recertification process may not have been pertinent in these cases.

Table 1: Reasons for not recertifying

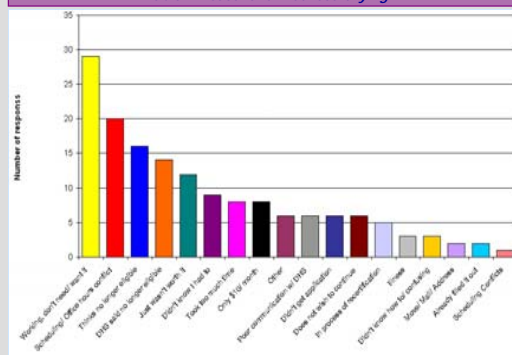


Table 2: Reasons for missing interview

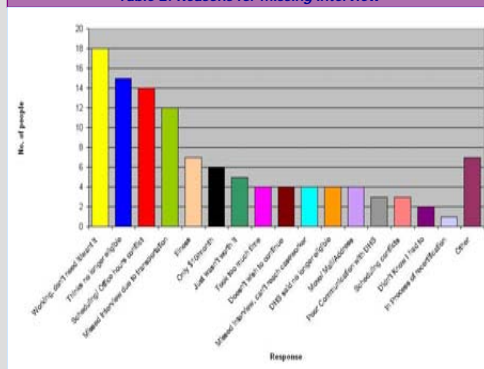
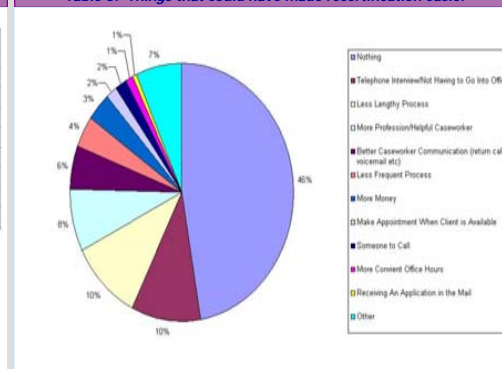


Table 3: Things that could have made recertification easier



CONCLUSIONS

As illustrated in Figure 1, researchers were only able to contact a small percentage (19%) of those who failed to recertify. Of the initial 2211 phone numbers, the majority of numbers were either disconnected, wrong, or never answered. The transient nature of this study population may limit the effectiveness of phone-survey research.

Despite a wide range of reasons for non recertification, the most common responses seem to indicate the respondents do not believe they are eligible, particularly if they are working, and may in fact prefer not to be on the program. Implications for policy of these findings are discussed below.

DISCUSSION

Notably, telephone interviews may not be the best way to reach eligible participants. While the researchers attempted to obtain a random sample, the results indicate that they may have inadvertently been biased towards those participants with stable contact information. Additionally, all non-English speakers were excluded from the study. Hence, the sample used in this research was not representative of the actual population of people who need/use the food stamp program.

Without stable contact information, it is difficult to access eligible individuals via phone, and nearly impossible for RIDHS to mail them the materials needed for recertification. Since the majority of the people (80%) who were contacted were willing to participate in this study, the study group felt as though much valuable data was lost due to lack of contact with potential participants.

Somewhat surprisingly, when asked “Is there anything that could have made recertification easier?” forty-six percent of the study participants responded “Nothing” (Table 3). Since this question came after a series of other questions probing the participants behavior, it is unclear whether or not participants would have provided more specific answers had the question been presented earlier in the interview.

The variability in participant responses suggest that reasons for not recertifying for food stamps are complex and multifaceted. Decisions to recertify or not are likely driven by a wide variety of factors and may not reflect an affirmative decision but rather a lack of decision. Future research is warranted on this possibility.

Unfortunately, data provided by DHS did not include demographic information in households such as household size, number of children, etc. It would have been interesting to see whether or not household heads were more likely to recertify for food stamps if they were living with dependents rather than living alone. Trends in recertification behaviors may vary as a function of background and demographic information on the households.

Future studies should attempt to test statistical relationships between household characteristics and the likelihood of recertification. Also, future research in this arena should strive to solve the problem of how to reach marginalized, transient populations who otherwise seem unable to be contacted through mainstream tactics such as phone surveys.

*Numbers reported in Figure 1 do not add up to 100%; 32 numbers were lost to follow-up.

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