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Family Economics Research Coordinating Committee (NCCC052)

Food Stamps and Food Insecurity

The issue. A central goal of the Food Stamp Program is the alleviation of food insecurity in the United States. Thus, the negative association between food stamps and food security among food stamp eligible households has perplexed policymakers. This negative association has been ascribed to several factors including self-selection based on unobserved household characteristics, the timing of food insecurity versus food stamp receipt, misreporting of food insecurity status, and misreporting of food stamp receipt. While previous work has studied the first two issues, the literature has not assessed the consequences of measurement error. This paper uses data from the Core Food Security Module (CFSM) from the 2003 December Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS), to investigate what can be inferred when food stamp participation and food insecurity status may be misreported.

Understanding the implications of misreporting of food stamp participation is especially important in light of the extensive underreporting (of up to 25%) found in several studies. Due to its subjective nature, the extent of misreporting of food insecurity status cannot be established but there are reasons to believe that it may be misreported. For instance, parents might misreport being food secure if they feel ashamed about heading a household in which their children are not getting enough food to eat or, alternatively, recipients might misreport being food insecure if they believe that to report otherwise could jeopardize their eligibility.

According to our research. Consistent with previous work on the relationship between food stamps and food insecurity, we find that food insecurity rates are 17.8 percentage points higher among food stamp recipients in comparison to eligible non-recipients. (The difference is 6.4 percentage points when looking at very low food security, formerly known as food insecurity with hunger.) However, even when we impose strong assumptions restricting the patterns of classification errors, we find that food stamp participation error rates of 10.1 percent are sufficient to prevent us from being able to draw firm conclusions about relationships between food stamp participation and food insecurity. (Error rates of 2.9 percent are enough to overturn conclusions about food stamps and very low food security.) Thus, to conclude that food insecurity rates are higher among food stamp recipients than non-recipients, one must place a great deal of confidence in reports of food stamp participation; a confidence that is not consistent with reports of misreporting found in previous studies. The possibility of misreported food insecurity status further exacerbates this uncertainty.

Policy conclusions. Given no plausible mechanism through which food stamps would diminish food security, we conclude that the negative relationships between food security and the receipt of food stamps among observationally similar eligible households might be explained by the large presence of measurement error both in food insecurity and food stamps participation.

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The NCCC052 committee, functioning under the National Agricultural Experiment Station System, facilitates collaboration among family economics researchers nationally and internationally. The committee provides a forum to examine research methodology and family economic issues in depth from a multidisciplinary perspective. The committee fosters development of research related to the economic well-being of individuals and families that is of interest to multiple institutions across the nation. For more information, see <http://nimss.umd.edu/homepages/home.cfm?trackID=7036>.