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West Coast Poverty Center

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

A Partnership of the SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, the DANIEL J. EVANS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
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DIALOGUES on Research and Policy

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Food Insecurity and State/Nonprofit Collaboration on the West Coast

LOW INCOME FAMILIES who need help with food, shelter, health care, or other needs face a complex web of public and private providers and eligibility rules. To serve these families effectively, providers often find they must collaborate. With support from the West Coast Poverty Center, sociologist Mark Edwards has recently explored how policy changes brought by welfare reform have changed the relationships between public social service agencies and nonprofit groups working on food insecurity on the west coast. This brief describes Edwards's findings, beginning with an overview of food insecurity among west coast families and their use of supports such as food stamps and continuing with a look at how state and nonprofit actors collaborate to serve such families. On pages 4-5, we summarize policymakers' and practitioners' response to the study, including their thoughts on its implications for their work on food insecurity and directions for further research.

What Is Food Insecurity?

A household that has no worries or difficulties in getting enough food for everyone in the household is food secure. In recent years (prior to 2008), about 90 percent of American households have been in this situation. In about one household in ten, however, the adults have expressed uncertainty about having enough money for food and may have had to shrink portions, skip meals, or stretch or reduce their food intake in other ways to get to the end of the month. Such households are considered food insecure.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture monitors trends and patterns in food insecurity, working with the Bureau of Labor Statistics to gather annual survey data on thousands of American households. Among the food insecure households are some that are characterized as having "very low food security," a condition sometimes referred to by advocates as "hunger." While the survey of households does not ask people directly about feelings of hunger or about nutrition, these households report at least six different ways that they have experienced concerns about and disruptions in their ability to provide as much food as they know they should for themselves and their family. In the U.S., typically around four percent of American households are in this most serious situation.

The official USDA definition of food insecurity is: "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways."

For more information on official measures of food insecurity and "hunger," see: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/measurement.htm>

Dialogues on Poverty among Researchers, Policymakers and Practitioners

The West Coast Poverty Center's DIALOGUES Projects bridge the worlds of academic research and real-world practice by supporting new research on critical poverty issues and bringing together researchers and seasoned policy practitioners to consider its implications. This first issue of DIALOGUES features sociologist Mark Edwards's findings on the role of public-nonprofit collaboration in the fight against food insecurity on the west coast, and the response of policy practitioners in Washington State, Oregon, and Washington, D.C.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington supports new research on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center and the DIALOGUES Projects is available from our website:
www.wcpc.washington.edu

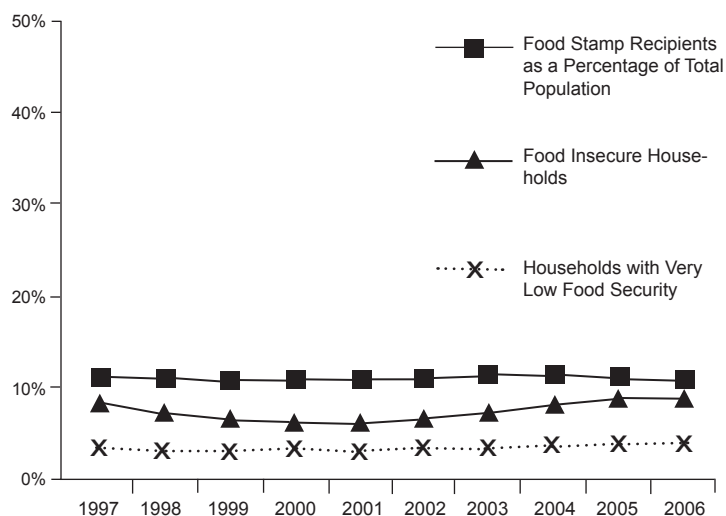
PATTERNS AND TRENDS: Food Supports

Food-insecure families can turn to a number of public and private supports. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known until 2008 as the Food Stamp Program and still colloquially referred to as “food stamps”) is the largest federal food and nutrition assistance program, but millions of American also receive benefits or food from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), as well as school breakfast and lunch programs and summer nutrition programs. Some federal food assistance programs are available to those with incomes up to 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. States also have some flexibility to set rules regarding access to food and nutrition benefits. As the chart below shows, 11 percent of households reported food insecurity in 2006 and roughly 9 percent of the population (in nearly 12 million households)

received food stamps. Participation rates have fluctuated in the past two decades, but in recent years roughly two-thirds of those eligible for food stamp benefits have collected them.

Food stamp caseloads reflect numerous forces, including the population that is eligible for assistance, the complexity of the application process, and the extent to which individuals have access to, and take advantage of, alternative resources, such as private food assistance from the vast network of private food banks, shelters, and other hunger-relief agencies. Although comprehensive data on the number of families served by these private sources is scarce, the largest private network of food banks reported serving between 24 and 27 million Americans in 2005 through food pantries, shelters and other forms of food assistance. Of these clients, an estimated 70 percent could be classified as food insecure using the USDA definitions. (For more information on the overlap between food stamp recipients and food bank clients, see links to additional resources on our website.)

U.S. Food Stamp Recipency Rates and Food Insecurity: 2000-2006



The number of families seeking food assistance is growing. From April 2008 to April 2009, the federal food stamp caseload rose 21 percent. Food banks have also reported rapidly growing demands for food in recent months at the same time that donations are declining.

Differences in Food Stamp Use and Food Insecurity in the West Coast States

Every state faces a unique set of forces, such as housing costs, unemployment rates, and the cost of living relative to average wages, that drive food insecurity and other indicators of economic need. Similarly, each state has its own public and private resources and infrastructure for addressing food insecurity in addition to the federally funded benefits the state administers. While these public and private food support systems have similar missions with respect to food insecurity, across the nation, the social, economic, and political context for public-private interaction varies: food support providers in any given state may have different organizational objectives and face different pressures, creating potential obstacles to working together to reach their shared goals. All of these differences among the states lead to different profiles of need for publicly funded food assistance.

In 2006, the west coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington had similar household poverty and food insecurity rates, but the proportion of the population receiving food stamps varied significantly, from a low of 6 percent in California to a high of 12 percent in Oregon (see charts on facing page). This variability may reflect some differences in need and eligibility across the states, but one reason for the lower recipiency rate in California is that only half of those eligible for food stamps received them, where in Oregon the take-up rate was 85 percent. (California provides food assistance to some low income households through a state program rather than through the federal program, partially explaining the apparently low take-up rate of food stamps.) The variation in food stamp participation rates also suggests that states vary in their ability to reach target populations, in the rules governing access and maintenance of benefits, in the willingness of their populations to use food stamps, or some combination of all of these. Below, we present research that helps us better understand how public and private actors work together to address such issues.

NEW FINDINGS: Collaboration between State Agencies and Nonprofit Advocates

Among other changes, welfare reform promised to create new opportunities for public and private collaboration in addressing many aspects of poverty, including hunger. In research funded by the West Coast Poverty Center, Oregon State University sociologist Mark Edwards interviewed 15 nonprofit leaders and public agency officials in California, Oregon, and Washington to gain insight into the conditions for, and obstacles to, the rise of collaboration in the fight against food insecurity in these states.

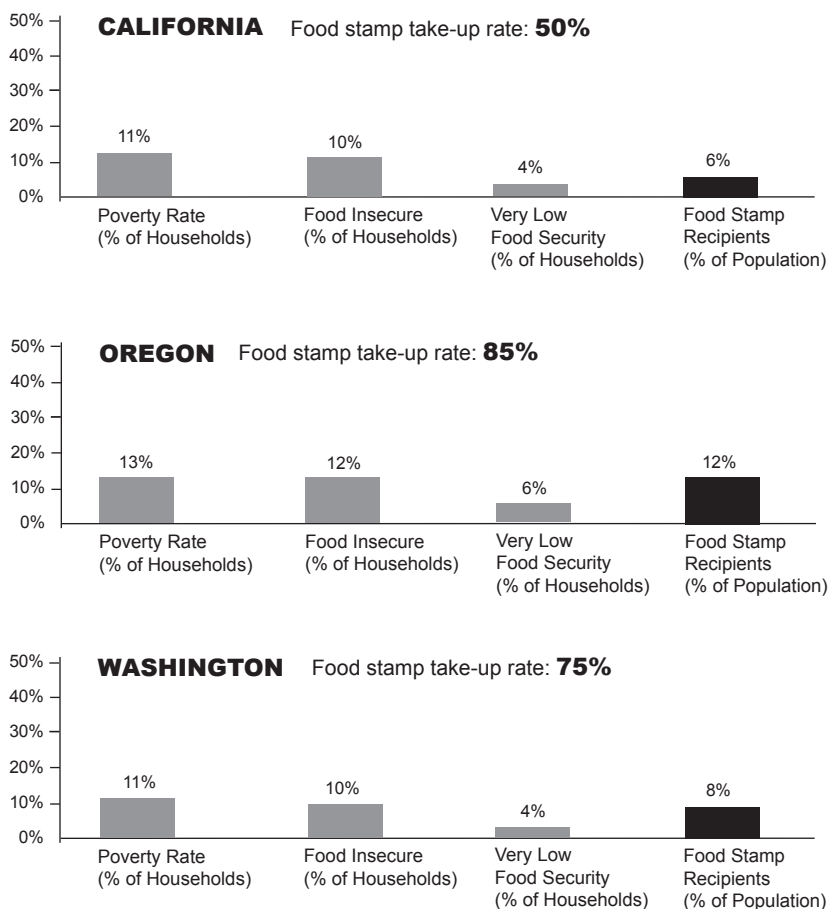
Two main findings emerged from the interviews. First, although state human service agencies and nonprofits have a lengthy history of competing or being in conflict with one another, collaboration between human service agencies and nonprofits has increased over the last two decades. Before welfare reform, public and nonprofit agencies came in contact primarily as nonprofits supplemented publicly-provided food assistance and lobbied to improve it. After welfare reform, nonprofits played new roles; as caseloads declined in the wake of welfare reform, some states hired nonprofits to help expand food stamp coverage. Because past relationships had often been adversarial, some nonprofit advocates noted that reaching a point where they could work constructively with state agencies took significant effort.

Second, the uncertainty and flexibility produced by welfare reform also provided opportunities for new types of relationships between nonprofit and public agencies. With various new options for expanding food stamp eligibility and access, states had to make decisions about how to proceed. The interviews describe how nonprofit advocates, especially those that operated at a national level or that had contacts in other states, were able to act as experts, providing state agencies with valuable information about other states' policy choices and experiences and helping them design policies to improve access to food assistance. For example, one nonprofit advocate said, "Recently I had an e-mail forwarded to me by one county analyst, where one county leader urged another county person to talk to me because I was the best resource. So one county is referring another county to me, and not to the state nor to another county." In addition, rather than just receiving unsolicited criticism from advocacy orga-

nizations, nonprofit advocates reported that some states now invite them to provide feedback on the state's performance. For example, an Oregon leader recounted how feedback from advocates helped the agency understand how the very long application form was preventing people from successfully applying. They formed a working group of agency leaders and advocates which developed a much shorter application form that was widely recognized by applicants and agency workers as a significant improvement.

Similarly, the interviews suggested that nonprofit advocates can play an important role in providing data to state legislatures about hunger needs as well as about the economic rationale for addressing those needs. One advocate noted that this is an important role because, "There is no incentive for legislators or agencies to identify that (a) the problem exists, (b) the problem is worse than we thought, or (c) we are doing a poor job addressing the problem. Any of those insights puts new pressure on leaders and agencies to do more."

West Coast Food Insecurity, Food Stamp Receipt, and Poverty, 2006



The study also found that advocates sometimes play a role in linking agencies within the same state. A nonprofit advocate said, “One of the things I want to do is get groups together. For example, two Bay Area counties simultaneously came up with an idea to help the homeless get food stamps... Now, (a group of service providers) in Los Angeles who work on Skid Row are going to be on a conference call so they can learn from the Bay Area counties.” Nonprofit advocates can also provide an indirect link between states and philanthropies: by funding advocates’ efforts to educate policymakers on food insecurity and hunger, philanthropies can promote their own agendas without directly participating in lobbying themselves.

Over all, Edwards’ interviews suggest that nonprofit/state agency collaboration is more extensive and more varied than in the past. While it is not possible to demonstrate a causal relationship between greater collaboration and improved outcomes for vulnerable populations in these states with

available data, anecdotal evidence suggests a connection may exist. Trends in food stamp receipt and hunger across the west coast states suggest that “hunger” rates are responsive to improvements by states at enrolling eligible people for emergency assistance. Between 2000 and 2006, the rates of food insecurity and hunger dropped as food stamp receipt increased in Oregon and Washington. Oregon, which has a very high food stamp participation rate, was also the state in which advocates described the most collaborative relationships with state agencies. In California, on the other hand, advocates also described important relationships with state agencies but the state’s food stamp participation rates remained low even as food insecurity also declined. Edwards concludes that additional efforts to link patterns of food insecurity and food stamp participation with state agency/advocate collaboration would help clarify the effectiveness of these relationships in improving access to publicly-funded food assistance.

DIALOGUE: Practitioners and Policy Makers Respond

IN JUNE 2009, the West Coast Poverty Center invited a group of national and state policymakers and practitioners to join a conversation with researcher Mark Edwards on his findings on agency/advocate collaboration and food security (see box at left for participants). WCPC Associate Director Jennifer Romich, Associate Professor at the U.W. School of Social Work, facilitated the conversation. Highlights from the discussion follow, organized around some broad questions about the study and its impacts.

1) What are the implications of this study for advocates’ and agencies’ work on food insecurity?

Public and nonprofit Dialogue participants generally agreed with Edwards’s conclusions about the types of nonprofit advocate/agency relationships that have developed in the west coast states and the importance of these relationships for addressing food insufficiency. Local advocate and agency representatives noted particularly strong advocate/agency ties in Washington and Oregon. But Stacy Dean, Director of Food Assistance Policy at the Washington, DC-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), cautioned that the tenor and strength of these relationships may not hold across other states for a number of reasons, including state agencies’ capacities or willingness to meet with advocates and vice versa.

DIALOGUE Participants

Researcher

Mark Edwards, Associate Professor of Sociology, Oregon State University

Policy Practitioners

Leo Ribas, Director of Community Services, Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Services

Rachel Bristol, Executive Director, Oregon Food Bank

John Camp, Lead Analyst for Food Assistance, Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Services

Stacy Dean, Director of Food Assistance Policy, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Mark Nord, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

West Coast Poverty Center, UW

Jennifer Romich, Associate Professor of Social Work, WCPC Associate Director

Rachel Lodge, Program Director

Shannon Harper, Doctoral Candidate in Sociology, Research Assistant

2) Other than food stamp enrollment, how else can nonprofit groups and state agencies collaborate to reduce food insecurity? Are there obstacles or unrealized potential not discussed in this paper that need to be explored?

The practitioners noted that families' losing eligibility for public assistance generally (including food assistance) is a major concern and an area in which additional collaboration might help families continue to receive needed supports. Economic researcher Mark Nord of the USDA underscored that several federally funded food and nutrition programs in addition to food stamps, such as WIC and the Summer Food Service Program, also provide opportunities for collaboration. With respect to obstacles, the participants noted that even if agency officials and advocates share general goals (as participants agree is often the case) they may have different ideas about methods and timing, so it can be difficult to build the trust needed to work together. For effective collaboration to happen, both practitioners and agencies must be willing to work at it.

More generally, the practitioners noted that the incentives for collaboration are not always clear and that the opportunities to collaborate depend in part on the structure of state and local governments. For example, counties have much more control over social service provision in California than in Washington or Oregon. Further, while state agencies administer funding for the safety net programs that advocates support, legislatures often make the critical decisions about funding those agencies and programs. As John Camp, Lead Analyst for Food Assistance at the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, noted, advocates like the CBPP have helped state agencies make the case to legislatures to adequately fund administrative costs associated with changes in safety net programs, such as expanded eligibility. One practitioner also pointed to welfare reform's role in limiting litigation against state public assistance programs; the lack of this avenue for countering policy decisions may also have forced advocates to seek a more collaborative relationship with state agencies.

3) How does the current economic and political climate create new opportunities or challenges in this field?

Participants agreed that food insufficiency is a critical issue in the current economic climate. As the number of families needing food and nutrition assistance increases, the economic downturn has implications for how advocates and the states operate. Stacy Dean suggested that the difficulty in getting additional funding for benefits was forcing food advocates to consider alternative strategies, such as partnering with states to do outreach. The states may be feeling similar pressures. Community Services Director Leo Ribas, of the Washington State DSHS, said that his agency has been facing increasing caseloads at the same time that they are losing staff positions to state budget cuts. As a result, the state is seeking out additional partnerships with nonprofit agencies to help with outreach. As another aspect of the downturn, Mark Nord noted that federal stimulus funds may be available for

directly enhancing food and nutrition programs or for improving the employment and earnings of less skilled, less educated workers more generally.

4) What further questions does the study raise?

The discussion raised questions about the most effective levers to address food insecurity and highlighted the difficult choices for states in deciding whether to invest more in administrative needs or in outreach. The practitioners expressed concerns over greater nonprofit participation in direct service provision, worrying that closer alignment with the states could make advocates reluctant to criticize them when necessary. Oregon Food Bank Executive Director Rachel Bristol observed a tension for nonprofits between wanting to work with the states and the fear that too much collaboration might shift an inappropriate burden of responsibility to the private sector.

The Dialogue participants agreed that quantifying how well food insecurity needs are being met is complicated and challenging. Food stamp eligibility and take-up rates are useful measures, but may not fully reflect families' need for some sort of food assistance. Bristol noted that Oregon had seen a long term growth in the need for food assistance over the last 15-20 years, which was not necessarily reflected in the USDA data. The Oregon Food Bank has gleaned valuable information about their clients' needs from focus groups with food stamp/SNAP recipients or potential recipients.

Assuming that nutritional assistance continues to be delivered through public-private partnerships, new models of evaluating these partnerships must be developed. Dean noted that no one has been able to quantify the extent or impact of advocates' efforts to increase access to food and nutrition programs. Ribas mentioned a new United Way/King County/Washington State DSHS partnership to send volunteers door-to-door to screen families for food stamp eligibility and help them apply for services. Whether such partnerships serve the public good is an open question. Advocates, state agencies, and researchers may be able to work together to develop better information on the impact of such efforts.

DIALOGUES on Research and Policy

Food Insecurity and Collaboration

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. 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 Education (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wcpc.washington.edu

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This first issue of DIALOGUES features work by sociologist Mark Edwards on the role of public-nonprofit collaboration in the fight against food insecurity, along with comments from policy practitioners on the implications for their work.

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- Differences in Food Stamp Use and Food Insecurity in the West Coast States
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ON THE WEB:

For more information on this Dialogue and on food insecurity, visit our website, www.wcpc.washington.edu.