

MU researcher suggests revision of food stamp application process

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An estimated 35.1 million Americans live in "food insecure" households, meaning that at some time during the previous year they were unable to obtain or were uncertain of having enough food to fulfill their basic needs. Consequently, many of those people seek aid from federal sources including the Food Stamp Program. Now, a University of Missouri poverty expert has found that, depending on the food stamp benefit amount, the emotional distress associated with food insufficiency is higher among food stamp participants.

"Our hypothesis was that participation in the Food Stamp Program would have a positive impact on participants' mental and emotional health, but the results were not what we expected," said Colleen Heflin, assistant professor with the MU Truman School of Public Affairs. "The results suggest the opposite – the negative mental health aspects of participating in the Food Stamp Program seem to outweigh the positive mental health aspects."

The negative mental health effects primarily occurred during participants' application process and transition into the program. According to Heflin, the process can be time consuming and emotionally draining. Possible negative effects on emotional health include the stigma associated with food stamp participation, association with welfare culture and difficulty meeting eligibility requirements.

Previous research has been conducted on the health consequences associated with food insufficiency. Until now, researchers had not

examined the impact of the Food Stamp Program on the relationship between food insufficiency and mental health.

"We found a dosage effect – such that food-insufficient individuals who received higher amounts of food stamp benefits suffered greater emotional distress than those who received lower amounts of food stamp benefits," Heflin said.

According to the study, further evaluation is necessary to find the direct cause for emotional distress in new food stamp participants. Heflin said that, based on the findings, modifications to the Food Stamp Program are needed to improve overall well-being among new participants. She suggests implementing a web-based application system, currently used in at least five states, that eliminates the face-to-face interview process and allows clients to choose the time and place they submit their applications. Heflin said future research will help determine the effectiveness of the web-based process.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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