



**Immigrant
Use of
Public
Assistance
Programs**

**AFDC and
Food Stamps**

Jose R. Hinojosa
J. L. Polinard
Gary J. Tschoepe
Robert D. Wrinkle
University of Texas—Pan American

This article examines the extent to which Mexican immigrants to the United States benefit from state and national welfare programs, and whether immigrants participate in public assistance programs for the same reasons as United States citizens of Mexican descent.

Welfare reform has moved near the top of the nation's policy agenda. Although the debate over the nature of the reform is complex, the issue is not whether there will be reform but what will be the scope of the reform.

Virtually all the reform proposals focus on reducing expenditures for public assistance programs that provide benefits to low-income recipients. In 1994, for the first time since the question was asked by pollsters, public opinion surveys indicated that a majority of the population did not believe that it was a public obligation to help those who were unable to help themselves. This national consensus is driven, in part, by economics—concerns about government budget deficits—and, in part, by ideology—a belief that public assistance encourages irresponsible behavior among the poor. Government assistance programs are blamed by welfare critics for stifling domestic economic growth, and for damaging recipients' chances of becoming self-sufficient.

The welfare debate has been influenced by the contemporary debate over immigration policy. Immigrants, both illegal and legal, have been targeted as a population that should have its benefits reduced or eliminated. The impetus for this action reflects a belief that undocumented immigrants not only come to the United States illegally, they, either by

design or circumstances, take advantage of the various public assistance programs. Proponents of restricting the legal immigrant's access to public assistance contend that acceptance of public assistance by legal immigrants violates the understanding that legal immigrants come to the United States already able to rely on family assistance for employment, or aid if employment is not available.

Although support for cuts in public assistance to immigrants reflects a widespread belief that immigrants are likely to participate in such programs, existing studies are ambiguous on this point. A recent study (Fix and Passel, 1994) concludes that immigrants are an overall net benefit to the host country, leaving more money in the system than they take out. Simon (1984) also concludes that immigrants are a net benefit to the host country. Simon suggests that immigrants lag approximately 15 years behind the native-born population in terms of receiving welfare. Borjas and Trejo (1991) are critical of Simon, arguing that recent changes in the immigrant cohort have produced immigrants more likely to use public benefits earlier than previous immigrant populations. Borjas and Trejo find that as immigrants become more assimilated, they are more likely to utilize welfare (1991:204–205).

There is also an ideological cast to the current debate. Political conservatives, typically advocates of assistance cuts for immigrants, contend that existing public assistance programs create a self-perpetuating "culture of poverty" that increases the number of welfare dependents. Liberals argue, on the other hand, that immigrants come to this country for the same reasons that motivated previous generations: a desire to start a new life. They come willing to work hard and do whatever is necessary to climb up the economic ladder. They do not come, liberals contend, with a goal of getting on the public dole.

This article compares Mexican immigrant participation rates with Mexi-

can-American participation rates in two public assistance programs, Food Stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and examines those factors associated with immigrant participation in these two public assistance programs.

Methodology

The data used for this study is collected from a survey of residents of Hidalgo County, Texas. Hidalgo County borders Mexico. This proximity to the border ensures that there is a steady stream of immigrants from Mexico. Data from the 1990 census indicate that over 85 percent of the population of the county is Spanish surnamed, and approximately 97 percent of that population is of Mexican origin.

The county also is one of the most impoverished in the nation. Given that Hispanics in general are more likely than Anglos to receive some form of public assistance (Borjas and Trejo, 1991: 204), and that the poverty level of Hidalgo County is higher than that of most other regions, we acknowledge that there is a contextual effect that must be considered in analyzing our data.

Our sample was stratified by the percentage of registered voters in each census tract. Household selection was done by a two-stage cluster sample, utilizing a respondent randomizing device (Backstrom and Hursh-Cesar, 1981:94). Of the 475 contacts made, 461 usable surveys were collected. Approximately one-fifth of the interviews were conducted in Spanish from an authenticated translation of the survey instrument.

As the participation in these programs is a dichotomy, we use logistic regression to examine the influence of several independent variables upon the level of participation in a public assistance program. The dependent and independent variables are discussed below.



Model

The dependent variable is participation or nonparticipation in Food Stamps and AFDC programs. Participation is coded 1. Our independent variables include household size, income, education, and English fluency. We expect that an increase in household size will increase the need for public assistance benefits.

Income also should be negatively related to participation in public assistance programs.¹ Obviously, an individual whose income is above allowable program eligibility standards is unlikely to be participating in that public assistance program. However, the literature suggests that low-income marginal eligibles are less likely to participate than very needy eligibles because the public assistance benefits received by the very needy are more generous (Moffitt, 1980; Coe, 1985; Moffitt, 1983; Moffitt and Beebout, 1993).

We expect that, as an individual's educational level increases, he is more likely to have the requisite job skills necessary for obtaining employment. As participation increases, therefore, partici-

pation in public assistance programs should decline.

Fluency in English is another independent variable. We expect that fluency in the English language should enhance an individual's job opportunities, and, therefore, should be negatively related to participation in public assistance.

Discussion

We examined whether there are significant differences in the rates of participation in Food Stamps and AFDC programs between immigrants and native-born citizens. There is no statistical difference in the rates of participation in the two programs (54% for native-born and 59% for immigrants in Food Stamps) and (14% for native-born and 16% for immigrants in AFDC).

We next use logistic regression analyses to identify those variables that influence respondents to participate in Food Stamps and AFDC. Table 1 describes our findings for the entire respondent population, both native-born and immigrant, for participation in the AFDC

program. Only one variable (income) is statistically significant, and in the expected direction for both groups. The lower a respondent's income (both native-born and immigrant), the greater the probability of participation in the AFDC program. No other independent variable achieved statistical significance.

We also examined variables that influenced participation in the Food Stamps program. Table 2 reports these findings. This equation is the same as that of Table 1, with the addition of participation in AFDC as an added independent variable. We use this additional variable because research has shown that AFDC participation drives Food Stamp participation (Coe, 1985; Lane, Kushman and Ranney, 1983; MacDonald, 1977; Author, 1995). This same literature demonstrates that this relationship is recursive and not reciprocal.

Income is the only statistically significant variable for the immigrant group and it is in the expected direction. The less income a respondent has, the greater the probability of participation in the Food Stamps program. We find no statistically significant relationship between participation in AFDC programs and participation in Food Stamps for the immigrant group.

When we examine the native-born group, a slightly different result emerges. For this population, the probability of participation in the Food Stamps program increases as household size increases. Participation in the AFDC program also increases the likelihood of participation in the Food Stamps program. Also, as English fluency increases, the probability of participation in the Food Stamps program declines as it does with an increase in income.



Table 1. AFDC

Variables	Native Born	Immigrants
Income	-.266 (.079)	-.561 (.148)
Size of Household	-.067 (.127)	.220 (.135)
Education	-.005 (.057)	.077 (.077)
English Ability	.183 (.268)	-.221 (.304)
	N = 238	N = 151
Percent of Cases Correctly Classified	84.94	82.20
-2LL	189.40	114.70

Table 2. Food Stamps

Variables	Native Born	Immigrants
Income	-.329 (.070)	-.274 (.104)
Size of Household	.388 (.112)	.158 (.112)
Education	.006 (.046)	.030 (.053)
English Ability	-.664 (.236)	-.127 (.207)
AFDC	1.78 (.531)	8.46 (19.2)
	N = 238	N = 151
Percent of Cases Correctly Classified	69.87	71.71
-2LL	256.18	163.26

For the native-born group, these findings were expected. However, for the immigrant population, the lack of predictors similar to those of the native-born population was somewhat surprising. It is interesting that we found similar rates of participation between the two groups, but a difference in predictors.

We also modeled the probability of participation in the Food Stamp program by using the logistic regression results (Menard, 1985). Holding all variables constant at their mean, or in the case of dichotomous variables, their mode, a native-born Mexican-American had a 49 percent probability of participation in the Food Stamp program, while an immigrant Mexican-American had a slightly higher probability of 56 percent. These probabilities reflect the differences in income between the two groups as well as the fact that the native-born group had different significant predictors.

Conclusions

As both welfare reform and immigration reform move to the forefront of the nation's policy agenda, it is desirable that we have a base of knowledge to be used in the development of these important issues. We have examined here the rates of participation in two public assistance programs among both immigrants from Mexico and Mexican-Americans, as well as those variables that influence this participation.



Our data show that immigrants do use welfare services and that there is no significant difference in the rate of participation between immigrants and native-born Mexican-American citizens. As interesting as that finding is, it may be that the difference in predictors of probability of Food Stamp participation found here is the important research finding. To somewhat repeat ourselves, the important feature is not the rate of participation, but why the immigrants are participating. We suggest that the slight difference in probabilities of participation between the two groups will attenuate as the difference in income between the two groups disappears. Given the importance of the welfare and immigration debate, this must be considered an area of ongoing research. *END*

Note: References available upon request.

¹We use only income as an independent variable and do not use employment because of collinearity between income and employment.