

## **Introduction**

The United States offers a variety of public benefits programs that are designed to prevent the poor and vulnerable from falling below a given poverty level. These social safety nets are transfer programs and include cash transfers, food-based programs, subsidies for electricity or transportation, and fee waivers for health care and utilities. All these programs are designed to assist people living in poverty or at risk of falling into poverty. However, not all people who could benefit from these programs access this assistance. To what extent does limited English proficiency shape one's access to benefits? This paper will use data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to explore the association between language and the likelihood of receiving aid from the Food Stamp Program, now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>1</sup>

## **Background**

This research on the association between English language proficiency and the probability of receiving public benefits is informed by two streams of prior research--the factors that affect participation in government assistance programs and how English language proficiency shapes varied socioeconomic outcomes.

The United States seeks to provide a social safety net through a variety of programs. Examples of the types of assistance offered through these programs include cash transfers, food stamps, housing vouchers, and subsidies for utilities and transportation. Numerous factors shape who among the eligible population participates in these programs. Social networks can influence welfare participation. If people's social networks are comprised of welfare recipients who have a working knowledge about the system, their networks are able to alert them to opportunities for assistance and help them navigate the bureaucracy and application process (Bertrand et al. 1998).

There may also be a stigma associated with participation in these government programs that may create a barrier to participation (Algert et al. 2006). Some eligible people may choose not to participate if they or broader society consider participation to be demeaning, undesirable, or even detrimental to self-respect. In this case, people would forgo the opportunity to receive public assistance in order to avoid the stigma associated with participation.

An additional factor that may limit access to these government programs is confusion about eligibility and rule changes. The negative effects of confusion on the likelihood of participation became particularly apparent after welfare reform in 1996. After welfare reform, there was declining participation in some programs like food stamps. Researchers have shown that confusion about changes to eligibility rules, and confusion among recipients who became

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<sup>1</sup> The Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in October 2008. We refer to the benefits as "food stamps" to be consistent with the terminology in the 2008 SIPP data.

ineligible for other types of assistance, were key factors in the declining participation (Schirm and Castner 2002).

There are also unique factors that may affect noncitizens' use of public benefits. The 1996 welfare reform imposed some restrictions on legal immigrants' access to public benefits and set some time limits. Scholars have argued that this welfare reform had a "chilling effect" that discouraged eligible immigrants from using health, nutrition, and other benefits (Fix and Passel 1999). Under this framework, welfare reform created confusion among immigrants on eligibility requirements and also created fears about "public charge doctrine" where the INS may consider someone's likelihood of becoming dependent on public benefits in the admissibility and deportation of aliens who have been in the U.S. for less than 5 years (Fix and Passel 1999).

Another factor that may disproportionately affect immigrants' participation in public benefits—language—has only been examined briefly and at the level of a single city or state. People with limited English ability may have difficulty completing paperwork required for enrollment in programs or communicating with program officers. In an examination of Los Angeles, Algert et al. (2006) found that limited English language skills act as a barrier to food stamp program participation. In an examination of SNAP access in Texas, Newman and Scherpf (2013) found that people living in linguistically isolated, non-English speaking units were less likely than other eligible people to access SNAP benefits. Is limited English proficiency also associated with decreased likelihoods of food stamp and other program participation at the national level?

We examine an association between English language proficiency and receipt of public assistance given the findings from city-level research and given the clear link between English language proficiency and a myriad of socioeconomic outcomes. English language proficiency plays a role in school success with effects on achievement and attainment. For example, English language proficiency is associated with higher test scores net of other key background characteristics (Rumbaut 1997). Poor English proficiency may result in placement in lower grade levels, which can impede attainment. Vernez and Abrahamse (1996) found no association between English spoken at home and high school completion but found a negative association with going to college. There is also a documented relationship between English language proficiency and labor market outcomes. Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) found that language proficiency was positively associated with the likelihood of employment and that a lack of English fluency was associated with lower earnings.

This paper draws together the research on the effects of language on socioeconomic outcomes and research on the factors associated with receipt of public assistance to examine whether English language proficiency is associated with receipt of food stamps. In 1999, the USDA estimated that 57 percent of eligible people in the U.S. received food stamps (Schirm and Castner 2002). This research explores whether limited English proficiency is a factor in why eligible people do not participate in the program, net of race and nativity.

## **Data and Methods**

This paper uses data from the 2008 SIPP Panel. The 2008 SIPP is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of the United States that began in 2008 with follow-up interviews every four months through 2013. The main objective of the SIPP is to provide accurate and comprehensive sub-annual information about the income and program participation dynamics for individuals and households in the United States. Detailed information about who within a household is covered under a given program makes this dataset ideal for this research. In addition to economic and program participation information, the SIPP also collects information on a variety of relevant demographic and background characteristics, including race and ethnicity, educational attainment, nativity, and marital status.

The primary outcome variable of interest is a binary variable for food stamp receipt. The primary explanatory variable will be English language proficiency, measured with a three category variable—speaks only English at home, speaks a language other than English at home but speaks English well or very well, and speaks a language other than English at home and speaks English not well or not at all.

Since immigration is closely linked to ethnicity and language (Glick and White 2003), this paper will carefully account for both ethnicity and immigration status. We will follow Fix and Passel's (1999) method for distinguishing immigration status. This methodology will enable us to drop from the analyses immigrants who are likely undocumented and thus ineligible for most public benefits.

In order to accurately model the likelihood of receiving food stamps, it is critical to correctly identify the population eligible to participate. In order to do so, this paper will use the eligibility requirements published by the USDA. Establishing eligibility takes into account household size and monthly income as well as deductions for things like dependent care and child support payments. Van Hook et al. (1999) shows that unit of analysis matters when considering differences in public assistance receipt, and so these analyses will be at the individual level. In the SIPP data, there are over 15,000 respondents with household income values less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

Since people who are eligible for food stamps are not randomly selected from the population, simply restricting the universe of the analyses to people who are eligible could lead to biased estimates of the predictors of food stamp receipt. Therefore, we will use a bivariate probit model with sample selection. The first equation will model eligibility for food stamp receipt and the second equation will model food stamp receipt.

Language can have direct effects and can also be a proxy for other factors that limit participation. We will seek to tease out these effects in our models.

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