

About this report

This brief is based on the study “Exploring the Structural Determinants of Food Stamp Program Participation in the South: Does Place Matter?” funded by the Southern Rural Development Center in 2008 as part of its Research Innovation and Development in Economics (RIDGE) competitive grants program.

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One-Size DOESN'T Fit All

Different Reasons Drive Food Stamp Use in Areas across the South

Research by Tim Slack and Candice Myers, Louisiana State University

Many factors contribute to poverty, including place. Some areas, for example, have higher unemployment rates, while others have high concentrations of people with less education or highly segregated minority populations, all of which are known to raise the risk for poverty. This brief looks at what factors influence food stamp use in the South.



The South as a region has historically faced higher rates of poverty than the rest of the country, with specific areas in the South at a particular disadvantage. The Delta and Appalachia, for example, have struggled for decades with persistent poverty. Not surprisingly, these two areas also have higher rates of public assistance. Appalachia, for example, has twice the rate of food stamp participation than the nation as a whole.

In their RIDGE paper, “Exploring the Structural Determinants of the Food Stamp Program Participation in the South,” Tim Slack and Candice Myers find distinct regional differences across the South in the factors that contribute to higher food stamp use - a diversity policymakers should keep in mind when designing programs to help families attain a higher standard of living.¹

¹ The South is defined as counties in the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Washington D.C., Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Age, Segregation, and Education Drive Higher Food Stamp Use in the South

The authors find that food stamp use is 62 percent higher in the South than elsewhere in the country. In regions outside the South, 8.2 percent of the countywide population, on average, receives food stamps. In the South, 13.2 percent do. Not surprisingly, traditionally high-poverty areas report even higher food stamp use. In the historical “Black Belt,” 13.4 percent rely on food stamps. In the Delta, 18.5 percent do, as do 19 percent in the Texas border area. The highest rate of food stamp use, at 21.9 percent, is in Appalachia. Furthermore, food stamp use clusters in certain counties, particularly those surrounded by neighboring counties with high rates of participation. In contrast, counties characterized by low rates of food stamp use have neighbors who also rely less on food stamps. This clustering is more evident in the South and in high-poverty regions than in other areas nationally.

In determining what contributes to food stamp use, certain factors carry more weight in the South than in other areas of the country. For example, unemployment, the share of the population that is not of working age (children and seniors), the percentage with less than a high school education, and the degree of black-white segregation are all associated with higher food stamp participation in the South than is true in the rest of the country. Conversely, in small towns in the South, participation is significantly lower than in small towns in the rest of the nation.

Reasons for Food Stamp Use Differ across Historically High-Poverty Areas

Regional characteristics associated with food stamp use are notably different in high-poverty regions of Appalachia, the Delta, the Black Belt, and the Texas-Mexico Borderland than in other places around the country.²

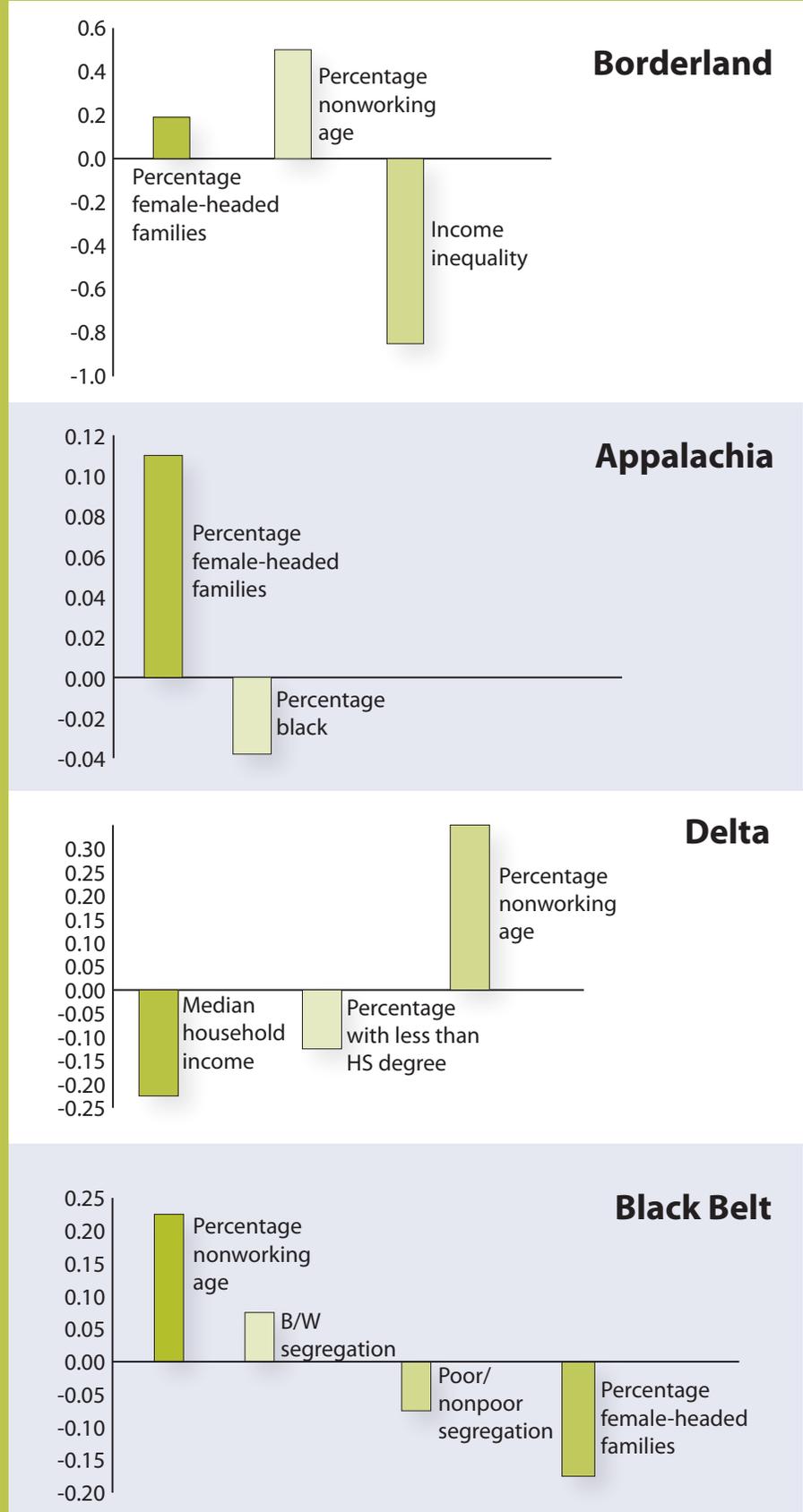
In the Borderland, for example, higher shares of single-mother households and nonworking-age populations are associated with higher food stamp participation compared with other areas of the country. This difference likely reflects special disadvantages faced by single mothers and their children in the region. Conversely, higher income inequality is associated with less food stamp use in the Borderland than is true elsewhere. None of the other characteristics examined, such as the level of immigration, the share of the population that is black or Latino, the level of education, or segregation, had greater impact on food stamp use in the Borderland areas than elsewhere.

The accompanying inset displays the differing influences on food stamp use in each region. As in the Borderland, in Appalachia, a higher share of single-mother households is associated with particularly high food stamp participation. In addition,

² The Texas Borderland is defined as all Texas counties whose largest city is within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Appalachia is defined as counties delineated by the Appalachian Regional Commission in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Delta is defined as counties delineated by the Delta Regional Authority in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The Black Belt is defined as the crescent of counties spanning from North Carolina through Texas, minus those counties in the Delta definition.

Factors associated with higher or lower food stamp use vary widely by area

In Appalachia, for example, higher shares of single-mother families are associated with larger food stamp caseloads than in other parts of the country, while the share of the population that is black is associated with lower caseloads than in other parts of the country.



the share of the population that is black is linked to lower rates of food stamp use. Given the historical disadvantages faced by black people in this country, the latter finding may seem surprising. But the history of black disadvantage is largely absent from the history of economic distress in the central Appalachian region, where the population is overwhelmingly white. Other factors such as immigration, the share of working-age residents, the share of Latinos, education levels, and segregation levels are comparatively no more significant in Appalachia than in other parts of the country.

In the Delta, greater shares of children or elderly (that is, those of nonworking age) are linked to high food stamp participation, while higher median income is associated with comparatively lower food stamp caseloads. Further, higher shares of residents without a high school degree are associated with comparatively less food stamp use than is true elsewhere, in part reflecting the low levels of education that prevail in the region. Other factors often linked to higher risk for poverty, such as higher shares of single-mother households and minority populations, were no different in their influence on food stamp use in the Delta than elsewhere in the country. These findings are further contextualized by the fact that, after controlling for the full range of other variables considered in the analysis, food stamp use in the Delta was not significantly different from that seen in other areas of the country. In other words, the variables considered in this research explain the high food stamp use in the Delta region.

In the Black Belt, larger populations of nonworking-age individuals and more black-white residential segregation are linked to higher food stamp use than elsewhere in the country. Conversely, where there are higher shares of single-mother families and greater segregation of the poor from the nonpoor, food stamp use is lower than what is typically found in other places. These somewhat paradoxical findings are explained in part by the significantly lower food stamp use in the Black Belt than would be expected given the socioeconomic characteristics of the region.

Place Matters

These varied, and sometimes counterintuitive, results make one thing abundantly clear: place matters. The South, and those areas in particular with high poverty, face unique challenges in terms of economic hardship generally, and the need for food assistance specifically. This research shows that when it comes to food stamp use, different factors are more salient depending on the region in question. One-size-fits-all assumptions about the larger economic and cultural characteristics at play across the social landscape will therefore likely miss the mark. It is our hope that the information in this report will prove useful to a variety of stakeholders interested

in identifying communities that are likely to have special food assistance needs or helping them to better anticipate how local social change may influence such needs in the future.

In Appalachia, a higher share of single-mother households is associated with particularly high food stamp participation. In addition, the share of the population that is black is linked to lower rates of food stamp use. Given the historical disadvantages faced by black people in this country, the latter finding may seem surprising.

Study Description

To study the extent to which regional and local conditions uniquely affect food stamp use, the authors used data from the Food and Nutrition Service, the Economic Research Service (both agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), and the U.S. Census Bureau. They analyzed average food stamp use between 2004 and 2006 in 2,561 counties across 34 states. They also compared food stamp use in the South with the rest of the nation, and high-poverty areas with the rest of the nation.

In considering how the characteristics of places might influence food stamp use, the authors assessed local labor market conditions (such as the unemployment rate), population structure (for example, the share of the population that is not of working age—children or seniors—or the share of families headed by single mothers), education levels, concentration of English language speakers, residential segregation between the poor and nonpoor and minority and majority groups, and local expenditures on cash assistance.

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