



# ILLINOIS FAMILIES STUDY

## policy brief

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# Putting food on the table after welfare reform

## What protects families from food insecurity?

### Summary

*Results from the first two annual Illinois Families Study surveys show that the proportion of current and former welfare recipients who had difficulties feeding their families remained relatively stable, at about one-third of the sample in 1999-00 and 2001, despite drops in TANF and food stamp use during the same time period. Certain groups of families, such as those who were not working, experienced troubling levels of food insecurity. A growing reliance on informal supports and crisis assistance in 2001 may signal a trend towards increased food insecurity for some low-income families in the future. Receipt of food stamps was shown to buffer the risk of food insecurity. Access to food stamps and emergency food resources for former welfare recipients should be increased.*

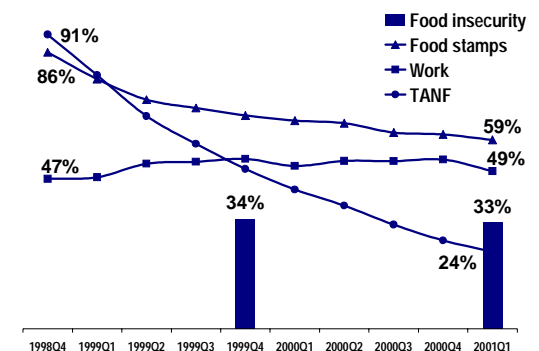
### Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines “food insecurity” as limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods.<sup>1</sup> Previous research has found that children who are food insecure face a greater risk than food secure children for adverse developmental outcomes, including grade failure, lower scores in reading and math, and health and mental health problems.<sup>2, 3, 4</sup> While many families have experienced increases in income and employment in the wake of the 1996 welfare reforms, reductions in welfare benefits, low wages, and periods of unstable employment may give rise to problems such as food insecurity. This policy brief draws upon the results of two rounds of interviews in 1999-2000 and 2001 with 1,183 current and former welfare recipients in Illinois to 1) assess food insecurity in relation to work, welfare, and food stamp use, 2) assess food insecurity in relation to the use of informal resources and 3) identify risk and protective factors for food insecurity.

### Food insecurity, work, welfare, and food stamp use

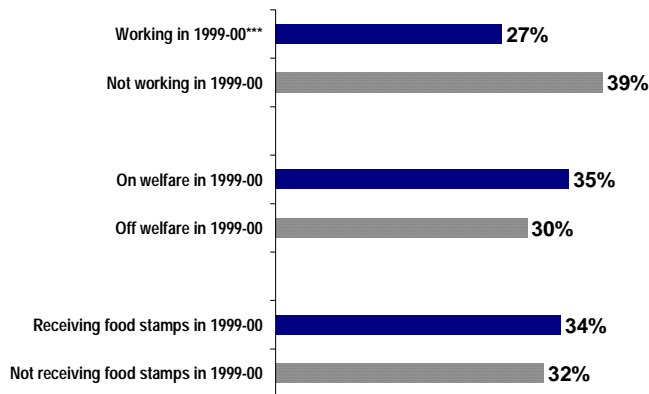
Between 1999-00 and 2001, food insecurity remained relatively stable for the families in this sample, while TANF (“welfare”) and food stamp use declined and work effort increased slightly (see Figure 1). The proportion of respondents who reported any difficulties obtaining nutritious food for

Figure 1. **Trends in food insecurity, work, TANF, and food stamp use (1998-2001)**



Source: IFS survey data and administrative data

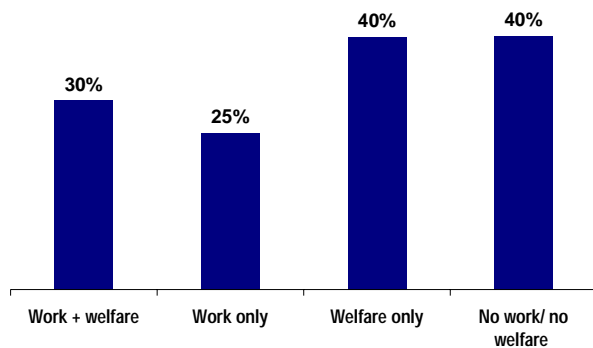
**Figure 2. Food insecurity in 2001 by work, welfare, and food stamp status in 1999-00**



\*\*\*= p ≤ .001

Source: IFS survey data

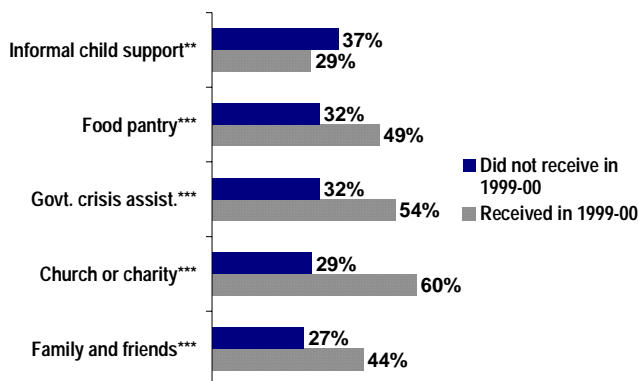
**Figure 3. Food insecurity in 2001 by work and welfare status in 1999-00\*\*\***



\*\*\*= p ≤ .001

Source: IFS survey data

**Figure 4. Food insecurity in 2001 by informal support in 1999-00**



\*\*= p ≤ .01, \*\*\*= p ≤ .001

Source: IFS survey data

themselves or their children<sup>5</sup> was 34% at the time of the 1999-00 survey, compared to 33% in 2001. According to administrative records for the same families during a similar time period, TANF use dropped from 43% to 24% and food stamp use dropped from 65% to 59% between the first quarters of 2000 and 2001.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between work, welfare, and food stamp use in 1999-00 and subsequent food insecurity in 2001. Families in which the respondent was working in 1999-00 were significantly less likely than those who were not working to be food insecure in 2001 (27% vs. 39%, respectively). There were also differences by welfare and food stamp status, although these were not statistically significant.

Figure 3 displays food insecurity for four different groups of respondents: those who were combining TANF and work (“work and welfare”), working and not receiving TANF (“work only”), on TANF and not working (“welfare only”), and neither working nor receiving TANF (“no work/ no welfare”). Those who were in the “no work/no welfare” and the “welfare only” groups in 1999-00 were most likely to report any food insecurity in 2001. Forty percent of the respondents in each of these groups reported food insecurity for themselves or their children, compared to only 25% of the “work only” group and 30% of the “work and welfare” group.

### Food insecurity and informal support

Respondents were asked about their use of several different types of informal support, such as help from family and friends and food pantries. With the exception of informal child support, respondents who received help from these sources in 1999-2000 were more likely to be food insecure in 2001 (see Figure 4). These differences were statistically significant. Although it is unlikely that these types of support cause food insecurity, the receipt of such resources may be a more general indicator of financial hardship.

Between 1999-00 and 2001, there was a significant increase in informal support from churches and other private charities and a slight increase in the use of government crisis assistance (not shown). Given that this type of support may operate as a “red flag” for future food insecurity, the observed increase in informal support in 2001 may be a cause for concern.

## Risk and protective factors for food insecurity

In order to identify factors that uniquely contributed to food insecurity in 2001, we conducted multivariate analyses that controlled for demographic characteristics (age of the youngest child, education level, region, marital status, family income-to-needs ratio) and the level of food insecurity in 1999-2000.

After controlling for these characteristics, two *protective factors* emerged that *reduced the risk* of food insecurity:<sup>6</sup>

- Consistently receiving food stamps in 1999-00<sup>7</sup>
- Receiving informal child support in 1999-00

Again controlling for these characteristics, the following indicators were identified as *risk factors* for food insecurity:<sup>6</sup>

- Unstable food stamp receipt (losing food stamps for one or more months in the year prior to the 1999-00 survey)
- Receiving help from a government crisis assistance program in 1999-2000

## Conclusions and policy implications

The slight decrease in reported food insecurity between 1999-00 and 2001 among current and former TANF recipients, despite drops in TANF and food stamp use, was a positive trend in Illinois. Certain groups of families, however, such as those who were not working, experienced troubling levels of food insecurity.

The receipt of food stamps was shown to buffer the risk of food insecurity, while the loss of food stamps may trigger a short-term increase in food insecurity for some families. These findings indicate that the Food Stamp program can have a powerful impact on families making the transition from welfare to work.

Suggestions for helping these families avoid hunger and food insecurity include:

- Increase access to food stamps and other food assistance programs for former welfare recipients and their children
- Expand outreach efforts and increase community resources for providing emergency food assistance services, particularly for families transitioning off food stamps
- Develop more effective assessment strategies for identifying families in need of food assistance during their transitions from welfare to work

## Notes

1. Andrews, M., Bickel, G., and Carlson, S. (1998). Household food insecurity in the United States in 1995. *Family Economics and Nutrition Review*. 11 (1). 17-28.
2. Alaimo, K., Olson, C.M., and Frongillo, E.A. (2001). Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development. *Pediatrics*. 108 (1). 44-53.
3. Alaimo, K., Olson, C.M., Frongillo, E.A. and Briefel, R.A. (2001). Food insufficiency, family income, and health in U.S. preschool and school-aged children. *American Journal of Public Health*. 91 (5). 781-786.
4. Kleinman, R.E., Murphy, M., Little, M., Pagano, M., Wehler, C.A., Regal, K., and Jellinek, M.S. (1998). Hunger in children in the United States: Potential behavioral and emotional correlates. *Pediatrics*. 101(1). Available at <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/101/1/e3>.
5. Food insecurity is measured by the presence of any reported reductions in the amount of food intake among household members (respondents and their children) or in their consumption of nutritionally balanced meals. The measure of food insecurity used in the IFS is derived from selected items developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (See Bickel, G., Nord, M., Price, C., Hamilton, W., and Cook, J. (2000). *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services. Alexandria, VA.)
6. Results of linear regression using a summary scale of food insecurity items as the outcome measure. Factors listed were found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
7. The comparison group for this finding was the subset of respondents who did not receive any food stamps in the year prior to the 1999-00 survey.

*This policy brief summarizes a report prepared by Joan Yoo and Kristen Shook Slack, School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin at Madison.*

*The report is available from the authors at: [ksslack@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:ksslack@facstaff.wisc.edu).*

## About this study

The goal of the Illinois Families Study (IFS) is to inform policymakers about how Illinois families have been faring since the implementation of welfare reform. The study is being conducted by a consortium of researchers from five Illinois universities: Northwestern University, Roosevelt University, Northern Illinois University, University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago. The interviews are conducted by Metro Chicago Information Center (MCIC).

A total of 1,363 current and former welfare recipients from nine Illinois counties were interviewed at Wave 1 of the study (November 1999 - September 2000). Of those respondents, 1,183 were interviewed again at Wave 2 (February 2001 - September 2001). The response rates were 72% at Wave 1 and 87% at Wave 2. All analyses are weighted to adjust for regional stratification and non-response. The study will continue to follow these families for a total of six years.

## For more information about the study:

[www.northwestern.edu/ipr/research/IFS.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/research/IFS.html)

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## Food insecurity & welfare reform

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