

The rules that govern eligibility for food stamps among legal immigrants have changed several times in recent years. Most recently, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 restored food stamp eligibility to legal immigrants who:

- were disabled, regardless of date of entry, effective October 2002;
- had been in the United States at least five years, effective April 2003; or
- were children age, regardless of date of entry, effective October 2003.

This study – conducted by The Urban Institute for the Food and Nutrition Service -- examines the implementation of these provisions to improve our understanding of the variation in State and local approaches, the challenges encountered in restoring eligibility, the degree to which the eligibility restorations brought new immigrant households into the program; and the potential impacts of sponsor deeming and liability policies.

The study included six of the seven States with the largest immigrant populations (California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Texas), and two States with rapidly growing immigrant populations (North Carolina and Tennessee). Data were collected through telephone calls to State food stamp administrators in fall 2002, spring 2003, fall 2003, and phone calls or visits to local food stamp offices in summer 2003.

The study estimates that over 150,000 legal immigrants were added to food stamp caseloads across the eight States. The April 2003 change restored benefits to approximately 135,000 immigrants with five years of legal residency. The October 2003 change restored benefits to about 18,000 non-citizen children. The October 2002 restoration added a relatively small number of disabled legal non-citizens, less than 4,000.

The majority of those added to the caseload were former state-funded food assistance participants in California (nearly 100,000), Massachusetts (4,000), and New Jersey (2,000). These immigrants and their families did not see any changes in benefit levels. There were also increases in legal non-citizen food stamp caseloads in Texas (25,000), Florida (22,000) and Illinois (4,000). For the most part, the new participants in these States lived in mixed citizenship households with U.S.-born children who were already receiving benefits.

Only a small number of immigrants became eligible in North Carolina and Tennessee because most were either undocumented or had arrived within the last five years. There was little evidence that large numbers of immigrant households without any previous connections to food stamps came onto the program, although this number may grow over time.

State outreach efforts targeted specifically toward immigrants were limited. Illinois was the only state which conducted a major public campaign specifically targeted to immigrants. During the time of the study, however, FNS made available several outreach tools and supports, including: airing Spanish language radio announcements about Food Stamp Program eligibility; making available Food Stamp Program materials in thirty-five languages; launching an on-line pre-screening tool that enables individuals to determine their eligibility for the program and the ability to calculate how much in benefits they might receive, among other initiatives.

For More Information

Capps, R., R. Koralek, K. Lotspeich, M. Fix, P. Holcomb, and J. Anderson (2004). *Assessing Implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill's Legal Immigrant Food Stamp Restorations*. Prepared by The Urban Institute for the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA (on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/fns).

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