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# A Policy Feedback Theory Approach to Food Assistance Program Distribution Mechanisms

Ahmad Sabbagh  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

A Policy Feedback Theory Approach to Food Assistance Program Distribution  
Mechanisms

by

Ahmad Sabbagh

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

Many families that experience hunger in the United States rely on Food Assistance Programs to meet their daily nutrition needs. However, these programs do not always meet the needs of these individuals, as has been the case for individuals living under higher than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. Using policy feedback theory (PFT), the purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of individuals from a county in the Great Lakes region of the United States, who depend on the federal Food Assistance Program, with particular attention given to evaluate the effectiveness of distribution mechanisms in helping these individuals meet their food needs. Data were collected through interviews with 11 program clients, 3 program administrators, as well as publicly available agency data. These data were inductively coded and then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure. Key findings revealed that clients perceived the Food Assistance Program as ineffective in preventing food insecurity without additional programs and resources. The findings also revealed that distribution mechanisms negatively impacted food recipients with limited income, resulting in increased food shortages, requiring recipients to seek additional food programs and resources. These findings also exposed barriers to employment opportunities for recipients, adding to the stress and anxiety experienced from food shortages. Positive social change implications from the findings include providing information to program administrators that can be used to improve the Food Assistance Program, which may in turn improve the lives of those who rely on food assistance programs.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who I cannot thank enough for all their support, love, and patience. Also, a special thanks to my friend Dr. Ali Awadi, who has paved the way of the Ph.D. before me in the community as a great motivator and inspiration.

Finally, to all the people that have made a positive impact in my life, that have helped me push myself physically, mentally, and spiritually!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Hunger continues to spread around the world. In the United States, hunger is also a growing concern (Libal, Tomczak, Spath, & Harding, 2014), but food assistance programs work to prevent hunger for low-income individuals and families (Daponte, Hailand, & Kadane, 2004). Adding up to 80 billion dollars a year, there are an estimated 47 million people in the United States receiving food assistance. The Food Assistance Program, originally known as food stamps, is funded under the Food Stamp Act of 1964 by the federal government but is administered by states (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2016). Although some states use the new name Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), states in the Great Lakes region of the United States still use the original name Food Assistance Program to refer to their programs. For this study, the SNAP will be referred to as the Food Assistance Program.

The Food Assistance Program was originally designed to feed the no income poor; however, it was later used to supplement the food needs of low-income working residents under the income poverty threshold (benefits.gov, n. d.). It is federally funded but administered at the state level. The Food Assistance Program is designed to supplement the food needs of working adults and families; however, income, assets, and allowable expenses determine how much benefits they can receive. Regardless of how little the household income is, there is a benefit maximum based on the group size. Furthermore, there are work requirements that can limit or disqualify certain adults from benefits. Currently, a household of a single person with no income can receive a maximum of \$194 a month. This benefit distributes to less than \$6 per day for food; the

amount decreases per person with more individuals in the group. Inflation and the rising cost of food consume most of this daily allowance.

Based on the limits of the Food Assistance Program, there is a need to increase benefits per person to prevent hunger, reduce food insecurity, meet daily nutritional values, and help individuals eventually achieve self-sufficiency. Currently, the Food Assistance Program reduces some food insecurity only with other food programs and some income (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2014). Additionally, policy changes are affecting households with no income, which includes shifting the program focus from feeding the poor to supplementing the food needs of working low-income families and work requirements (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013). However, there has been a general attempt to change policy or reevaluate the formula to determine the benefits of the program could protect additional families from hunger (Gunderson, 2015).

Despite previous research, there is little known about the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and its ability to provide food assistance for families with no income and access to alternative food sources. This was the gap that I sought to address with this study. I applied a qualitative case study approach to collect accounts of the Food Assistance Program in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. I used research questions and a survey protocol to analyze survey data. The analysis was shaped by the survey questions in the context of policy feedback theory (PFT). This chapter includes the study background, problem statement, purpose, social implications, research questions, theoretical framework, nature of study and assumptions made in the study. The theoretical

foundations served as a guide to understanding the distribution mechanisms are discussed further in Chapter 2.

### **Background of the Problem**

Hunger has been an issue in the United States for decades. During the Great Depression, food assistance programs were created to help prevent hunger for low-income individuals and families in the United States (Daponte et al., 2004). Since then, the number of families receiving help from the Food Assistance Program has increased, especially where foreclosures and unemployment have been high, which creates implications for the policy on the Food Assistance Program (Slack & Myers, 2014). Despite some suggesting that the issue of hunger has been resolved, the evidence from the literature shows hunger is becoming more prevalent in the United States.

It is estimated 925 million people around the world are experiencing food insecurity (Kozak et al., 2012) and 41 million are struggling in the United States (Feeding America, 2017). Over 20% of families in the United States are still experiencing unmet food needs and food insecurity (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2005). Access to federal food assistance programs is not enough, as hunger and food insecurity continue to increase in the United States (Fishbein, 2016). Additionally, only 59% are participating in the Food Assistance Program (Feeding America, 2017).

In addition to research on the issue of food insecurity, there has been substantial research on food assistance programs and their ability to reduce food insecurity in the United States (Klerman & Danielson, 2011; Libal et al., 2014; Slack & Myers, 2014). For example, focusing on different aspects and effects of food security in the United States,



Huffman and Jensen (2008) examined the Food Assistance Program's ability to meet basic food needs and increase food security. Likewise, Whitley's (2013) tested food security for rural households according to their social integration and social capital. Echoing this sentiment, Nguyen, Shuval, Bertmann, and Yaroch (2015) examined the relationship of the Food Assistance Program among food insecurity, diet quality, and obesity with adults in the United States. Most of the conclusions from research indicate that the Food Assistance Program reduces food insecurity only when combined with additional programs and food sources such as food pantries and soup kitchens.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Policy changes over the years, including changes in the Food Assistance Program's focus from the poor to low-income working families and work requirements, have impacted households with little to no income (Gassman-Pines & Hill, 2013). There have been general attempts to change the policy or to reevaluate the formula used to determine the benefits of these programs (Gundersen, 2015). However, these attempts have not met the food security needs of individuals who are with little to no income and access to alternative food sources. This gap has raised concern about the aptness of distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program in providing food assistance to families under these conditions.

One of the issues with the Food Assistance Program is that there is little known its distribution mechanisms. Originally, the Food Assistance Program was intended to help feed families with no income. Then there was a shift to social safety programs such as the Food Assistance Program providing food for families under the federal poverty level.

With the greater participation of families on food assistance and the focus of these programs changing to providing for low-income families, it left no income families hungry.

There has been extensive research on the Food Assistance Program; however, much of the research has been focused on the ability of the Food Assistance Program to reduce food insecurity combined with other food programs and limited income (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2014). For example, Oberholser and Tuttle (2004) argued that food security was only possible when families participated in multiple food programs along with the Food Assistance Program. Nichols-Casebolt and Morris (2002) also determined that families without income or access to additional food sources will experience more food insecurity. Finally, Daponte et al. (2004) suggested that both public and private food programs combined are needed to meet daily nutritional values.

Despite previous research emphasizing the issue of food assistance programs, there have not been studies on the role of the Federal Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms in providing food assistance for families with limited income and limited access to alternative food sources. But there is a growing concern toward the Food Assistance Program's ability to supply basic nourishment for working-class families (Nicholas-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Therefore, my research was aimed at filling a gap in the literature to improve understanding of the experiences of those who receive help from food assistance programs and to offer guidance for future policy. Relying on data from the Great Lakes region of the United States, and exploring the issue using a

PFT perspective, I assessed the role of ideas, actors, and networks in supporting the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms for little to no income families.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the role of distribution mechanisms of the federal Food Assistance Program in meeting the needs of families with limited income and limited access to alternative food sources in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. Additionally, this study was conducted to fill a gap in the literature regarding federal Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and their ability to meet the food needs of families with little to no income and limited access to additional food sources. Through an examination of how ideas, actors, and networks support the Food Assistance Program in meeting the food needs of individuals with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources, I sought to address the national concern of hunger by broadening understanding of the central role that distribution mechanisms play in the ability of federal the Food Assistance Program to address the hunger crisis in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States.

### **Research Questions**

From the research problem and purpose of the study, the following principal research question emerged: How does policy feedback theory help explain the role of distribution mechanisms in helping the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals with limited income and limited access to alternative food sources living

under the poverty level in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States? In answering this principal research question, the following secondary question is provided: What role do ideas, actors, and networks play in supporting the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework selected for this study is the PFT. The PFT emerged in the 1980s examining political behavior and the policy-making process (Beland, 2010). This theory has a solid foundation for analyzing public assistance programs and is still evolving. This theory has been used to evaluate different aspects of food assistance programs and is generally associated with the works of policy analysis ranging from evaluating existing policy to targeting social problems such as social well-being and economic efficiencies (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). For example, in the 1990s extensive welfare reform took place from the efforts of the PFT (Soss & Schram, 2007). This theory related to the study approach and research questions because it provided details to focus on the ideas, actors, and networks involved in food assistance programs rather than conceptualizing each step of the policy process (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). These elements helped ground the study by expanding on ideas, actors, and networks involved in the Food Assistance Program and its distribution mechanisms. This theoretical framework was also appropriate for proving a platform that might persuade public opinion and even shift the “locked in” policy in the Food Assistance Program. There will be logical

connections among key elements of the framework concerning a more thorough explanation in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study was a case study in a county in the Great Lakes region of the United States. This case study was conducted in this county given its large population of families living below the poverty level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), 25.1% of families are living below the poverty level in this county alone compared to 14.8% overall living under the poverty level in the United States. Data for this study was gathered with the permission of the selected county director of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (permission was also granted to identify this organization in this study) through interviews with 11 program participants and three program administrators. The purpose of this study was to address a growing national concern by broadening the understanding of the central role that distribution mechanisms play in the ability of federal food assistance programs to address the hunger crisis in the United States.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

My research was limited to exploring the Food Assistance Program and its distribution mechanisms. The scope of the study was also limited to a single county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States using a case study design. Sampling was limited towards little to no income participants expressing how effective the program is regarding their food security. Also, the PFT was

the foundation of the study to examine the Food Assistance Program. I excluded other food programs from the scope of the study because of their unique challenges.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of the study is that unlike quantitative research, qualitative researchers must address reliability and validity (see Creswell, 2009). To secure reliability, a researcher is required to validate an approach consistent with other researchers (see Gibbs, 2007). Reliability and validity were evaluated in this study by checking the accuracy of the findings, using specific procedures such as triangulation, descriptions, and bias clarification. I strived for consistency throughout the study with documentation of the processes (see Creswell, 2009).

Another potential limitation was access to families on the Food Assistance Program with no income. Identification of families on the program with no income was coordinated through the selected county DHHS. Therefore, the results of this study are limited to the DHHS Food Assistance Program recipients, and other food programs were not within the scope of this study.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will be significant for scholars and practitioners as hunger continues to rise in the United States. Over 41 million people struggle with hunger and food insecurity, which includes 13 million children and 5.4 million seniors (Feeding America, 2017). Individuals who do not have enough to eat are limited in their ability to provide health, education, and the other basic needs for their families, and their ability to find a job and overall ability to function in society is likely to be challenged as well. Therefore,

in this study, I addressed the effectiveness of the distribution mechanisms of the federal Food Assistance Program in meeting the needs of families with limited income and access to alternative food sources in the United States. The results of the study can offer information to improve the federal Food Assistance Program and the distribution mechanisms for such programs, thus improving the lives of those who receive help from food assistance programs.

### **Social Change**

My research on the Food Assistance Program can influence public policy and administration such as reevaluating the Food Assistance Program. Gundersen (2015) suggested reevaluating the program benefit formula and the program itself. Without influencing policy, the program recipients and families with little to no income and limited access to other food programs or resources will continue to experience hunger and food insecurity. By changing the policy or reevaluating the formula to determine the benefits of the program, it will protect families from hunger and make a positive impact.

This study will also contribute to knowledge about the common and personal experiences of food participants on the Food Assistance Program. A large portion of low-income individuals and families depend on private food assistance such as food pantries and soup kitchens due to the failure of the public Food Assistance Program (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Additionally, my research may empower the people it is intended for by advocating for the Food Assistance Program through scholarly research to affect social change (see Callahan et al., 2001). To promote a positive understanding of the history, contributions, and effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program, it is

important that those in the academic community, public government sector, private business sector for researchers, and government leaders to become knowledgeable about the factors that show how effective is the Food Assistance Program in its ability to prevent hunger in the United States. The findings from this study may lead to program improvements that promote social change by ensuring program participants have enough to eat and preventing further hunger in the United States.

### **Summary**

With the rising cost of food and limited access to additional food sources, food insecurity is rising in the United States. Researchers have mentioned the need to reevaluate the Food Assistance Program mechanisms; however, there is still a gap in the literature. Understanding distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program is necessary for the formulation of new and effective policies to adequately address the food needs of families across the United States. The research design, theoretical framework, and research questions served as the foundation for this study. The assumptions, scope and delimitations and limitations were also discussed in this chapter as well as implications for social change. A review of the literature anchoring this study is provided in Chapter 2.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to address the need to reevaluate the formula to determine food benefits for low-income households (see Gundersen, 2015). Therefore, I attempted to reevaluate the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms for food benefits. Additionally, this study addresses a lack of research on the effectiveness of distribution mechanisms in meeting the basic food needs of families with little to no income or limited access to alternative food sources in the United States. In this chapter, a review of research strategies is presented to assist in locating articles for future reference. The remaining contents of this literature will review highlight seminal research on the effects of the federal Food Assistance Program and distribution mechanisms. This chapter also provides information on the theoretical framework of this study. The most relevant studies to the research theme are discussed and categorized to establish the gap in the literature. Lastly, this chapter includes a brief review of the research method that helped identify what food assistance means for families with limited income and access to food sources.

### **Research Strategy**

Literature research was conducted using the Walden online library. SocINDEX was accessed using the general search terms *food assistance* and *distribution mechanisms*. Other search words such as *family*, *children*, *working poor*, *low-income*, and *nutrition* were used to narrow the search. The Walden online library provided all the needed articles for this review. A review of references was also conducted to locate

additional resources when the general search did not discover articles found through these search strategies.

### **Review of the Literature**

This literature review is divided into three parts. The first part provides an explanation of PFT and the role of ideas, actors, and networks. This is followed by the history of food assistance programs in the United States and highlights important developments and changes concerning policy. The literature review concludes with an evaluation of the Food Assistance Program in the literature.

### **Policy Feedback Theory**

Most theories of the policy process are used to examine policy creation with a focus on political landscapes and interest groups. The PFT brings a new dimension of the policy process known as “feedback effects,” providing insight on the ability of policy and that can help policymakers correct and create improved policy (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). The PFT is focused exclusively on social well-being or economic efficiency, aiming to solve social problems or to evaluate existing policies (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014).

The PFT emerged in the 1980s, influenced by historical institutionalism, to explore political behavior and policymaking (Béland, 2010). In the 1990s, PFT helped initiate extensive welfare reform (Soss & Schram, 2007), as it was used to initiate policy implementation and reform (McDonnell, 2009). Initially, the PFT was developed from policy feedback implemented to shape political dynamics, acting as an input and output in the policy process (McDonnell, 2009). The PFT was later evolved by Suzanne Mettler and Mallory SoRelle to understand what the effects are after a policy is adopted,

emphasizing resources and effects on the public. Although the PFT is focused on social welfare policies, the theory has over the years become used for exploring other policy areas like criminal justice (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014) and education (McDonnell, 2009). Because the theory is being used in other policy domains, the PFT was suitable to examine the Food Assistance Program. Furthermore, the PFT has primarily been used for single-policy case studies employing historical data, interviews, and statistical analysis (Mettler, 2005), which fit the purpose and method of this study.

The PFT contains two components (McDonnell, 2009). The first is the concept that making policies produces new politics (Schattschneider, 1935), and politics affect identities and resources of political interest groups and changes or increases state capacity (Skocpol, 1992). The other component of PFT research emphasizes mass political behavior that forms political identities, attitudes, and actions (Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2005; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Soss & Schram, 2007). However, both components suggest political, interests, institutions, and public perceptions, mobilizing the mass public and elites to shape future policies by acting once enacted (McDonnell, 2009).

The fundamental principles of PFT were used for a better understanding of the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms because this theory has a solid foundation in analyzing public assistance programs. Rather than theorizing each step of the policy process, this approach can help provide details on the potential of an expansive focus on public programs, focusing on the ideas, actors, and networks involved (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). This theoretical base can also help persuade public opinion and shift the "locked in" policy in the Food Assistance Program.

## **The Role of Ideas**

The ideas in the PFT are focused on the aim or purpose of a program or policy. To predict the most valuable approaches to solving social problems or evaluating existing policy, it is important to note how the policy came into being and its purpose for the public (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). Once created, a policy has the power to reshape a political landscape; this can also affect how policymaking occurs in the future (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). Therefore, it is important to consider how the program examined in this study started.

The Food Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps and now SNAP, is funded under the Food Stamp Act of 1964 by the federal government, but it is administered by the states (USDA, 2016). In the Great Lakes region of the United States, the program is named the Food Assistance Program (USDA, 2016). In an attempt to prevent hunger in the United States, the program was originally designed to feed the no income poor. Nearly 30 years later, the policy shifted in many public assistance programs, which led to refocusing the Food Assistance Program from the no income poor to the working low-income. The idea was to motivate people to work instead of feeding people who did not have an incentive to contribute to the economy. The policy shift supplemented the food needs of low-income working residents under the income poverty threshold instead of feeding them completely (Benefits.gov, n.d.). However, this does not consider people in between jobs or who have exhausted other resources. Additionally, 40% of working families on the Food Assistance Program has had to rely on private food

banks to compensate for food shortages, which suggests that families participating in the program ran out of food before the end of the month (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002).

### **The Role of Actors**

The actors in the PFT refer to the participants in the process (or actions) in the program or policy. In this case, the policymakers in the U.S. Congress are the actors. The forming of policy can affect political landscapes (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). For example, if policies affect the way people vote, this can influence policymaking, and policymakers can also be influenced by interest groups or political agendas (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014).

Food policy has always been determined by policymakers in Congress since the implementation of the program. Congress makes social welfare policy through creation, funding, and administration. The policymakers in Congress are actors who can terminate, change, or replace programs that were designed to provide food and nutrition assistance to prevent food insecurity (Oldmixon & Schechter, 2011). However, there is still a bipartisan majority coalition of policymakers supporting the food assistance program (Oldmixon & Schechter, 2011).

Policymakers are important to consider for the Food Assistance Program because with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996; the program became focused on the working poor. At that time, a strong economy and a drop in poverty rates triggered Congress to shift the focus of the Food Assistance Program. The goal was to motivate able-bodied adults to work while still ensuring increased food purchasing power of low-income households (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). This policy change was intended to supplement food needs for working families living under

the federal poverty limit instead of feeding them completely if certain household members fulfilled work requirements or education and training mandates. This shift forced families on the program to rely on additional food programs and resources to reduce food insecurity (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004).

### **The Role of Networks**

The networks in the PFT refer to the groups or systems of the program or policy. Once a policy is created, it can reshape the political landscape to affect subsequent policymaking (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014), creating an incentive for special interest groups and social networks to protect public programs or interests. In this study, there was a focus on the private and public food networks affected or correlated with the Food Assistance Program. This includes creating incentives for some networks while funding policy or programs such as the Food Assistance Program.

Private food networks have helped a large portion of Americans meet their basic food needs because they are not adequately served by the Food Assistance Program. The two largest private programs are food pantries and soup kitchens. Food pantries distribute free grocery and food items to families and individuals, and soup kitchens provide meals for families and individuals. A significant amount of people on the Food Assistance Program have been relying on the private network of food pantries and soup kitchens to meet their basic food needs, with one-third of these individuals working (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002).

Public food networks are another reliable source for food assistance participants. According to Nichols-Casebolt and Morris (2002), the USDA operates 13 additional

public food assistance programs to address all aspects of food insecurity in the United States. The larger programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the School Breakfast Program and the School Lunch Programs. However, the Food Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, is still the largest, most reliable federal food program because it expands to all Americans regardless of whether they have children (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). The other programs have reduced some food insecurity for families with children. The WIC and the School Breakfast Program and the School Lunch Program are for families with children and do not assist families and individuals without children. However, most working families rely on additional resources to cover food shortages (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004).

### **Hunger in the United States**

The principal cause of hunger and food insecurity is poverty (Kozak, Lombe, & Miller, 2012). According to the USDA, households unable to acquire adequate food needs, even at times, are food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). Food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to food to meet daily needs for all members due to insufficient money or other resources (Abell, 2015). There are close to 925 million people around the world experiencing food insecurity and hunger, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (Kozak et al., 2012).

Although the United States is one of the world's greatest food-producers, hunger and food insecurity is still on the rise. In the United States, 41 million people struggle with hunger and food insecurity, which includes 13 million children and 5.4 million seniors (Feeding America, 2017). In other words, more than 22% of world hunger is

experienced in the United States. Moreover, food insecurity is more likely among households with children (Feeding America, 2017). According to a study conducted by James (2014), in 2012, nearly 20% of U.S. households were food insecure, representing 33.1 million adults and 15.9 children (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). However, only 59% of food-insecure households have participated in federal food assistance programs such as the SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the WIC program (Feeding America, 2017).

The Food Stamp Act of 1964 was designed to prevent hunger in the United States, eventually becoming a national program available to all states by 1974 (Béland, Howard, & Morgan, 2014). Nationally, the program is now known as the SNAP. In the Great Lakes region of the United States, the program is called the Food Assistance Program. There are other well-known food assistance programs such as the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the WIC, known to have reduced food insecurity and improve the health of children (Gundersen, 2015). Depending on the monthly income level, a family may be eligible for the programs. Most of the programs have remained unchanged over the years, but the Food Assistance Program has undergone many changes over time (Gundersen, 2015). Regardless of the changes, hunger as not decreased. For example, after the Great Recession, 22% of children were hungry (Abell, 2015). Families relied on food Banks to reduce food insecurity, and each month, up to 20,000 people were served by food banks in 2013 (Abell, 2015).

**Historical background.** The Federal Food Stamp Act of 1977 established the Food Assistance Program to prevent hunger in the United States. In 2008, the Food



Assistance Program was established by the Federal Food and Nutrition Act, placing responsibility for the administration of the Food Assistance program with the USDA. The program is fully funded by the federal government. The Food Assistance Program is recognized as the SNAP at the national level, formally known as food stamps. In the Great Lakes region of the United States, the program is known as the Food Assistance Program.

The Food and Nutrition Service has responsibility for the administration of Food Assistance Program within the USDA, delegating the administration to state agencies. State agencies can choose not to participate in the program; therefore, not all states participate in the program. According to Benefits.gov (n.d.) states in the Great Lakes region of the United States participate in the program by a State Plan of Operations. Although the states have some discretion with the program policy, these sources are the legal base for all policies and procedures and are cited in manuals. State and federal policies are public information and are available for the public online in the form of numbered manuals.

**Program goal.** Originally, the Food Assistance Program was designed to feed the poor to prevent hunger in the United States. Currently, the purpose of the Food Assistance Program is to raise the food purchasing power of low-income families and individuals, as limited food purchasing power contributes to hunger and malnutrition (Benefits.gov, n.d.). Households eligible for the Food Assistance Program receive benefits based on net income and the size of the group to increase the food purchasing power of the eligible households who apply for the program. Food Assistance Program

benefits are not distributed in cash form and are not considered income or assets for other programs.

The program increases purchasing power by allowing an eligible group to buy eligible food items at any Food and Nutrition Service authorized approved meal provider or retail food store. Not all food items are considered eligible for purchase; eligible food includes any food products intended for human consumption except hot food prepared for immediate consumption, alcoholic beverages, and tobacco. Food and Nutrition Service providers can also provide seeds and plants to grow for personal consumption and meals prepared and served to eligible residents by a shelter for battered women, a substance abuse treatment center, and children or an adult foster care home approved by the Food and Nutrition Service. Other providers include retail food and grocery stores recognized by the Food and Nutrition Service that accepts the electronic benefit transaction card (in the Great Lakes region, it is called a *bridge card*). Additionally, meal delivery services are public or private nonprofit organizations that prepare and deliver meals to elderly persons (60 years of age or over), physically or mentally impaired persons, and their spouses, who are unable to prepare all their meals adequately. There are also nonprofit food purchasing ventures that are private nonprofit associations of consumers whose members pool their resources to buy food. Finally, individuals may receive food from house-to-house grocery vendors, such as milk and milk product deliverers, but not ice cream vendors.

The Food Assistance Program is the largest food assistance program in the United States (Nord, 2012). In 2010, the Food Assistance Program served over 40 million people

with their food needs (Nord, 2012). By 2013, over 47 million people were participating in the program with a price tag of almost \$80 billion a year (Gundersen, 2015). Although the Food Assistance Program is funded by the federal government, it is administered by the states. The Food Assistance Program was originally designed to feed the no income poor. Through the years, the program was reformed and changed depending on the political landscape; constricting and relaxing eligibility (Nord, 2012). For example, it restricted eligibility and changed the focus of the program from the no income poor to the low-income adults and families (Gundersen, 2015). Additionally, there are income and asset limits for program participation; gross and net income limits are set at 130% and 100% of the federal poverty threshold (Nord, 2012). Food Assistance Program participation is estimated to reduce food insecurity by roughly 30% (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010).

The Food Assistance Program serves as a safety net to prevent hunger in the United States for low-income individuals and families (Daponte et al., 2004). The National School Lunch Program is another federal assistance food program that operates in most public and private schools across the United States (Gundersen, 2015). This program began in 1946 in the National School Lunch Act. In 1966, the School Breakfast Program began, operating like the National School Lunch Program (Gundersen, 2015). These programs were designed to ensure low-income kids have access to adequate meals while at school. By 2012, 12.9 million children were participating in program daily (Gundersen, 2015). However, according to Gundersen (2015), an extraordinary number of eligible children do not participate in the School Breakfast and the National Schools

Lunch Programs. These programs have also gone through a series of changes over the years.

Despite the introductions and changes to the Food Assistance Program over the years, the Food Assistance Program remains the core component against hunger in the United States, serving over 47 million people (Gundersen, 2015). Currently, Food Assistance Program benefits are used to supplement food needs for low-income families, with a maximum of \$668 per month for a family of four without any income (Gundersen, 2015). The benefits increase slightly per additional person in a family. However, this equals less than \$5.50 per person for breakfast, lunch, and dinner per day. Although the Great Recession has ended, food insecurity is at an all-time high in the United States (Gundersen, 2015).

**Policy related to the Food Assistance Program.** A policy is usually formed to address a problem or issue. The policy process is a system-making process which involves diagnosing a problem that is worth addressing, such as hunger in the United States. According to Thies (2000), a policy is formed through the process of defining, adopting, implementing, evaluating, and changing or discontinuing a policy. In 1964, the Food Assistance Program, known as “Food Stamps” at the time, was implemented to address hunger in the United States, if people met the eligibility requirements (Thies, 2000). Eligibility is based on assets, income, and expenses. Any time during the policy process, a policy can be evaluated and changed (Thies, 2000). Although the Food Assistance Program is the largest and most expensive program, the federal government has always implemented programs and actions to reduce food insecurity for people to

endure a healthy and prosperous life in the United States (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013).

In the 1990s, Congress began to reevaluate and change the Food Assistance Program policies (Thies, 2000).

Policy changes over the years have drastically affected the Food Assistance Program. Originally, the Food Assistance Program was designed to feed the no income poor. The biggest policy changes were implemented in 1996, 2002, and in 2009, ultimately shifting the focus to low-income working families according to Gundersen (2015). Other policy changes include restricting legal immigrants and setting time limits for unemployed adults (Gundersen, 2015). Despite the changes, the Food Assistance Program remains the primary safety net towards the fight against hunger in the United States. The Food Assistance Program, the School Breakfast Program, and the National School Lunch Program have been successful in reducing poverty among low-income families. Food assistance programs are prevalent when the economy is weak; however, frowned upon when the economy is strong. During the Great Recession, Americans turned towards and relied on the program. Immediately following the economic recession, lawmakers began adding provisions to the program. For example, in 2007 Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) was reinstated (D'Angelo, Libal, Seymour, & Hamel, 2017). This rule implies an ABAWD must work, attend a job training program, or participate in community service to receive Food Assistance (D'Angelo et al., 2017).

Lawmakers restrict and loosen requirements on the Food Assistance Program depending on the political landscape. In 2014, lawmakers were under the impression

people intentionally did not work to collect food assistance (Cowan, 2014). This belief system sparked media attention and a generalization toward all people participating in the program. This belief system has carried over to the current lawmakers calling for a \$23 billion cut to the Food Assistance Program (Akin, 2016). These programs are crucial for families experiencing food insecurity. According to D'Angelo et al. (2017), only a small increment of the population participating in the Food Assistance Program are ABAWD; the majority are families with children. In other words, adults on the program not willing to work are a small fraction of the population experiencing food insecurity.

In 2016, 500,000 to 1,000,000 individuals lost access to the Food Assistance Program because of their ABAWD status according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Carlson, Rosenbaum, & Keith-Jennings, 2016). Although ABAWDs are still food insecure, they will not qualify for food assistance due to the policy. In 1996, lawmakers went on the record expressing frustration with ABAWDs not working, and allowing them to collect food assistance. This is meant to ensure anyone between the ages of 18 to 50 seek work at least 20 hours per week for the exchange of benefits from the Food Assistance Program if they are able-bodied (D'Angelo et al., 2017).

Although there were many policy changes and restrictions over the years, many state agencies are either ill-equipped or lax with the restrictions (D'Angelo et al., 2017). These rules require intense case management and become a burden for the employees. Normal benefits are good for one year, but ABAWDs are only allowed three months of benefits in a 36-month period (D'Angelo et al., 2017). Therefore, government employees are most likely to overlook or allow a "good cause" to reduce the workload. States have

some flexibility on how they administer such restrictions. For example, some states use time limit waivers for unemployment rates exceeding 10 % (USDA, 2015). Other states may allow “good cause” like states in the Great Lakes region of the United States.

Regardless of the policy, changes, and restrictions, hunger in the United States is still a problem worth solving. Abell (2015) describes hunger as an epidemic in the United States. The Food Assistance Program was designed as safety-net to prevent hunger in the United States (Gundersen, 2015). However, policymakers are restricting the programs instead of expanding them. A study conducted in Lynchburg, Virginia verified and examined a hunger and poverty problem (Abell, 2015). The natural action is to provide food where there is hunger. However, food is only a contiguous cause for hunger (Abell, 2015). In other words, feeding a poor person is a temporary solution. The author argued hunger could be alleviated through economic development and education, as a greater solution to food insecurity and poverty (Abell, 2015). As policymakers continue to generalize and restrict food recipients participating in the Food Assistance Program, hunger is still an epidemic in the United States. Policymakers must get a handle on this problem, presenting long-term solutions instead of time limits and ABAWD restrictions. Policymakers must get a handle on hunger in the United States and present creative food solutions to help alleviate poverty and reduce hunger (Abell, 2015).

Policy reforms have weakened the Food Assistance Program. Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra (2016) critiqued food banks in Canada to examine the effect they had on food insecurity; a cross-sectional survey sampling of 120,000 Canadians, aged 12 and older. Although food banks did not reduce food insecurity, it was clear that food

recipients relied on them. For example, 70 % of households who participated in food assistance programs were food insecure; furthermore, more than 50 % of food bank clientele were food assistance recipients (Tarasuk et al., 2016). This study concluded food banks do not reduce food insecurity and are an imperfect response to the problem, providing a cautionary tale for other countries such as the United States. Most importantly, policy reforms have weakened the food assistance programs, indicating no clear resolution to the problem (Tarasuk et al., 2016).

**Food assistance programs in the literature.** The literature has studied the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program, also known as the SNAP along with other food programs and food sources. Early research has confirmed a large portion of low-income individuals depend on private food assistance, such as food pantries and soup kitchens. For example, Nichols-Casebolt & Morris (2002) analyzed the relationship between working-class individuals and the Food Assistance Program. They found the majority of working individuals are receiving food assistance but relying on other resources to reduce food insecurity.

Also, they found that the Food Assistance Program without private food sources is not providing enough for recipients with some income. The authors reported more than one-third of the working-class individuals are receiving food assistance to reduce food insecurity (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). The researchers cite the growing concern toward the program's ability to supply basic nourishment for working-class households (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Even though most working individuals with some income and private food sources are experiencing some food security, the study



concluded that more than one-third of the working class in Virginia are receiving food assistance to reduce food insecurity (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). The study indirectly confirms those without income will experience even more food insecurity.

This study also presents crucial evidence that the Food Assistance Program is not fully able to provide adequate food security for individuals and families that are employed or employable with some income. In other words, individuals and families with no income would not have enough to meet their daily nutritional needs while on the Food Assistance Program. However, while this study does offer important findings, it is limited to the state of Virginia. The tested sample is also only focused on the working poor. Individuals and families on the Food Assistance Program with some income are most likely to rely on additional food sources to reduce food insecurity. Furthermore, participating in the Food Assistance Program does not provide adequate nutrition or prevent food insecurity. What about the individuals and families with no income? This study presents a substantial contribution to the food assistance programs and their ability when all sources are available. However, the study does not address the recipients with no income and limited resources.

In another quantitative study conducted by Oberholser & Tuttle (2004), the researchers studied the relationship between social demographic characteristics and food insecurity. They used a chi-square analyses to test the relationship between demographics, race, marital status and food programs (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004). Consistent with the previous study (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002), testing the relationship between social demographic characteristics and food insecurity, they

concluded that there was an increase in food insecurity among Food Assistance Program recipients. Food security was only possible when families participated in multiple food programs along with the Food Assistance Program (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004).

The results in the study were limited due to the inability for the researchers to distinguish between the households that qualify but do not participate and nonparticipating households (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004). This study provided beneficial information on the association of social demographic characteristics and food insecurity. However, it was also limited to families with some income. The researchers present a gap between food insecurity and nutritional and economic needs (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004). Another seminal piece of working families experiencing food insecurity on the Food Assistance Program without participating in other food programs, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, Program for Women, Infant, and Children, and Summer Lunch Programs.

During the same year, Daponte et al. (2004) designed an Extended Food Plan according to the USDA (1999) to measure the dollar amount of food resources needed to meet daily nutritional values. They sought to determine if public and private food assistance programs are meeting the minimal needs of poor households (Daponte et al., 2004). These programs were designed as a safety net to ensure low-income households are meeting the daily nutritional food intake and not experiencing hunger (Daponte et al., 2004). This quantitative study applied a multivariate linear regression to examine the relationship between different types of food assistance programs available and an Extended Thrifty Food Plan (ETFP). The study concluded that the available food assistance programs (both public and private combined) are meeting the valued cost of

the Extended Thrifty Food Plan. Similar to previous studies, Daponte et al. (2004) looked at different food programs among poor households with continuing food shortages. These programs included the Food Assistance Program, WIC, and food pantries. However, on the contrary to other studies, they concluded that the available food assistance programs (both public and private combined) are meeting the valued cost of the Extended Thrifty Food Plan. It appears both public and private combined are needed to meet daily nutritional values.

This quantitative study presented seminal research to the Food Assistance Program's ability to reduce food insecurity combined with other food programs and additional food sources. However, it fails to address the households with no income and limited access to private food sources. The researchers present seminal works on the efficacy of the Food Assistance Program and private food sources. After surveying 398 low-income recipients in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, they confidently stated there was a significant amount of food available when all resources were consumed (Daponte et al., 2004). However, the study fails to address no income recipients and access to the additional private food sources along with any barriers.

In later years, researchers began to examine dietary patterns associated with food assistance programs. Nnakwe (2008) analyzed the dietary patterns of low-income food assistance participants in a Midwest town. This quantitative study used the Person Chi-Square to compare the differences in food security, food intake, educational level, and marital status (Nnakwe, 2008). The study concluded there is a relationship between food security and level of education; households with children reported more food insecurity

than households with no children (Nnakwe, 2008). Moreover, the researchers cited households with children are more likely to have food insecurity than households with no children (Nnakwe, 2008). Oberholser & Tuttle (2004) study also supports Nnakwe (2008) relationship between food security and level of education (Nnakwe, 2008). Food insecurity increased as food groups decreased (Nnakwe, 2008). Again, both studies focus on working households with some income along with additional food sources. The studies fail to address the no income households and the limited access to additional food sources.

Although this study provides critical information on food insecurity and dietary patterns, the study was limited to the working class who had access to the local food pantries, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens. The study fails to address the no income poor and the working low-income that may not have access to the additional food sources to reduce food insecurity.

Concurrently, Huffman and Jensen (2008) tested the Food Assistance program's basic ability to reduce food insecurity. This quantitative study used a cross-sectional approach to test the relationship between food insecurity, labor force participation, and Food Assistance Program participation (Huffman & Jensen, 2008). The study concluded that individuals participating in the workforce and the Food Assistance Program experience less food insecurity (Huffman & Jensen, 2008). According to Huffman & Jensen (2008) households participating in the Food Assistance Program with employment income experience less food insecurity. Where does that leave the households with no employment income? Because the researchers challenged the Food Assistance Program's

ability to reduce food insecurity, they were able to measure the programs ability to meet the basic needs of low-income individuals. Individuals participating in the workforce and the Food Assistance Program experience less food insecurity (Huffman & Jensen, 2008); therefore, those not participating in the workforce will experience more food insecurity causing individuals to rely on other sources.

In 2011, Newman, Todd, & Ploeg (2011) analyzed the changes in the participation of low-income children in the many food assistance programs from “1990 to 2009”, along with other determinates. This study showed an increase in Food Assistance participation from 1990 to 2008 to help those with food insecurity. The data showed low-income household children participated in multiple food assistance programs to reduce hunger. This quantitative study used a regression to test the relationship between income and the participation of different food assistance programs. The study concluded poor and very poor children were more likely to participate in multiple food programs in 2008, much more than 1990 (Newman et al., 2011). In other words, participating in one program may not be enough for families experiencing food insecurity. This study focuses on the changes in the participation of low-income children in the many food assistance programs from “1990 to 2009”, along with other determinates supports much of the other research during that timeframe (Newman et al., 2011).

In 2013, Whitley (2013) expanded the research on food insecurity to rural areas, because many studies focused on urban areas. Big cities in the United States tend to overshadow small towns in rural areas spread all along the mid-west and on the outskirts of big cities. Whitley’s (2013) article examined the food insecurity of rural households

according to their social integration and social capital. This qualitative study employed the case study approach, attempting to identify a trend in poverty and hunger linked to limited access to retail grocery stores and local resources in the community, allowing those who are less connected to stay hungry (Whitley, 2013). Whitley (2013) concluded, rural towns “food deserts” received less fresh food compared to urban towns, due to smaller populations and less retail grocery stores. This study supports previous research on the Food Assistance Program and the need for additional sources, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, in both rural and urban towns causing low-income families on the Food Assistance Program will continue to experience hunger.

Other research attempted to look at the relationship of food insecurity and health problems. Gundersen and Ziliak (2014) presented the relationship between food insecurity and health problems. Although the Food Assistance Program reduced food insecurity, health problems among program recipients were still prevalent among some food insecurity (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2014). Research has shown increasing maternal mental health for mother reduces food insecurity as well. Although the majority of studies conducted on the Food Assistance Program are quantitative approaches, the article concludes that more qualitative research should be conducted to influence better policy toward food insecurity (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2014). This gap addresses the need for more qualitative approaches toward the Food Assistance Program.

Moreover, Gassman-Pines and Hill (2013) sought to examine the effects of social programs, such as food assistance, Earned Income Tax Credit, and child-care subsidies. Social safety net programs were designed by the federal government to improve the well-

being of families. Randomized research designs were deployed to learn if these social programs influence family well-being. The authors concluded the Food Assistance Program is reducing food insecurity and meeting its primary goal. Although the Food Assistance Program does not change the likelihood of keeping low-income families completely food insecure, there is no evidence that social programs affect family well-being negatively. Due to the policy changes in 1996, an overhaul of the United States social programs, there is a direct affect improving family and economic well-being. The Earned Income Tax Credit, child-care subsidies, and the Food Assistance Program had a positive effect on improving family well-being.

Digging deeper, Nguyen, Shuval, Bertmann, & Yaroch (2015) examined the relationship of the Food Assistance Program among food insecurity, diet quality, and obesity with adults in the United States. This quantitative study used the Bivariate and Multivariate method to test the relationship between the three variables (Nguyen et al., 2015). They concluded that there was a relationship with food assistance members and food insecurity, linking them to lower diet quality and obesity (Nguyen et al., 2015). This study will help supports and reinforces Gundersen & Ziliak (2014) research. The Food Assistance Program is not enough to feed a household without income. This study shows that the little amount provided for households is hindering their health rather than reducing hunger.

At the same time, Gundersen (2015) cited the opposite, when he examined the effectiveness of the food assistance programs, such as the SNAP (also known as the Food Assistance Program in the Great Lakes region of the United States), the National School

Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program abilities to reduce food insecurity among children and children's general health. Using a Theoretical Effect of SNAP, the article presents positive effects of the Food Assistance Program on low-income families and preventing food insecurity. By 2013 there were over 47 million people receiving food assistance, totaling 80 billion dollars; 14 million participants and a 50 billion dollar increase since the Great Recession (Gundersen, 2015).

Gunderson (2015) concluded on the positive effects of the programs toward families with children. However, Gunderson's study is limited to low-income children, and he doesn't cover all aspects of how food assistance may affect children's health. What about families without children that may not have access to the National School Lunch and the School Breakfast Programs to supplement the Food Assistance Program? Another concern, Gunderson focuses on low-income families with children. What about families with no income? Although the study is limited to low-income families with children and does not cover all aspects of children's health, Gundersen (2015) cites the need for research to re-evaluate the formula used to determine benefits and make it more effective by ensuring low-income households have enough food and the need to test the relationship between food insecurity and obesity.

The study presents a big gap in the literature and justifies a need to evaluate the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms. Social safety net programs were designed by the federal government to improve the well-being of families (Gassman-Pines and Hill, 2013). However, there is a possibility the no income families without children are hindered by the programs.



**Effectiveness.** Hunger is still on the rise. To battle hunger in the United States, the government has designed food assistance programs, such as WIC and the SNAP, (known as the Food Assistance Program). More than 20 % of families in the United States are still experiencing unmet food needs and food insecurity according to Nord, Andrews, and Carlson (2005). In other words, even with access to federal food assistance programs, hunger and food insecurity continue to increase in the United States (Fishbein, 2016).

These programs were designed to prevent hunger and increase food security in the United States. When these programs fail to prevent hunger, Americans tend to rely on food banks and soup kitchens. The ineffectiveness of the federal food programs triggered the increase of food banks as early as the 1980s (Poppendieck, 1999; Warshawsky, 2010), initiating food banks to become the largest food system in the United States (Warshawsky, 2010). Food banks are usually a response to government program ineffectiveness or decreased funding (Fishbein, 2016).

How effective are the food assistance programs? According to Mykerezzi and Mills (2008) participation in the Food Assistance Program can lower food insecurity by 19 %. Similarly, Nord and Golla (2009) cited food security improves immediately after benefits are available. In other words, it helps reduce food insecurity but fails to prevent food insecurity. These interventions are not addressing the entire problem. Originally, the Food Assistance Program, formally known as “Food Stamps” was designed as a defense mechanism against hunger during economic crises in some areas of the country, dating as far back as the 1930s in the United States (Vancila, 2008).

The program was eventually expanded across the United States by 1977, to prevent hunger. Operating as a safety-net against hunger, the program was geared towards the no income poor initially. Over the years, as the economy recovered, and political landscapes changed, the program was reformed multiple times, changing the focus of the program to the low-income working families. These changes were an attempt to motivate people to work to receive food benefits. These changes were also inspired by many factors. The program itself was scrutinized for encouraging people not to work and collect benefits from the government. This stigma still exists today forcing people not to participate in the program, to avoid the stigma, bureaucracy, and the cost-benefit breakdown (Vancila, 2008).

A study conducted by Vancila (2008) in Wisconsin investigated why low-income families chose not to participate in the Food Assistance Program. Households that met the food assistance requirements were opting out of the program and leaning on other resources such as food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters for their additional food needs. The study concluded with six themes as the cause for non-participation which included accessibility, stigma, bureaucracy, cost-benefit, program ignorance, and deservingness of the benefits (Vancila, 2008). The Food Assistance Program is the largest federal program addressing hunger in the United States, yet many eligible households are choosing to opt out. The Food Assistance Program was originally designed to feed the no-income poor then shifted to the low-income working households. Although the program is still the biggest defense against hunger in the United States, many households are choosing to opt out to avoid the issues currently attached to the program.

### **Distribution Mechanisms**

The Food Assistance Program was originally known as “Food Stamps” in the 1960s. The distribution of food during that time was through a form of paper money called a stamp(s) or coupon(s). Like money, it represented an amount and provided purchasing power of food items to prevent hunger and reduce food insecurity in the United States. This process represented the distribution mechanism for the program until the 1990s. Up until the 1980s, the Food Assistance Program was expanded. In the 1990s, to save money on printing paper coupons or stamps and to prevent fraud, the program was revamped, initiating a specialized debit card system called an electronic benefit transfer.

A form of electronic benefit for income eligible households, basically a debit card for food purchase (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013). Along with saving the government money, it provided immediate access to the benefits instead of waiting in a line for the benefits each month. In 2008, all food stamp recipients received an electronic benefit transfer card—a mechanism to distribute food in the United States according to the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013).

Most of the literature on food assistance programs are quantitative studies in an attempt to measure the effectiveness of the program along with additional public and private food resources. The selected approach for this study is qualitative, to get an “in-depth” understanding of the Food Assistance Program’s distribution mechanisms. Therefore, the PFT was selected to provide details on the potential of an expansive focus on the Food Assistance Program, to focus on the ideas, actors, and networks involved.

Although there have been many researchers reporting on the food assistance programs in the United States, Klerman and Danielson (2011) took a different approach. In conjunction with program effectiveness, the effects of a change in program policy were also analyzed. Klerman and Danielson (2011) examined the caseload increase of the Food Assistance Program, which has proliferated between 2000 and 2005. The Food Assistance Program was designed to offer benefits to low-income families to meet their basic food needs was working effectively, but the caseload had increased by 140% within a 10-year timeframe (Klerman & Danielson, 2011). Over the last two decades, policy on the Food Assistance Program has shifted away from focusing on aiding the non-working poor to supplement the food needs of low-income families that work.

Klerman and Danielson (2011) used a multivariate analysis and a difference-in-differences identification strategy to analyze such rapid growth from 2000-2010. They concluded, although the Food Assistance Program is helping people eat, there is a lag in a declining economy, along with the policy shift from the non-working poor to the low-income poor has caused a 140 % caseload increase. Any increase or decrease in the economy will continue to influence the Food Assistance Program caseload with long lags, which can only explain a portion of the caseload increase; however, the remaining increase is caused by the policy shift over the years. The Earned Income Tax Credit, child-care subsidies, and the Food Assistance Program had a positive effect on improving family well-being. However, due to the policy changes in 1996, an overhaul of the United States social programs, there is a direct affect improving family and economic well-being.

This evaluation of the SNAP, also known as the Food Assistance Program, rapid caseload increases from 1989 to 2009 according to Jacob Klerman and Caroline Danielson (2011), presented a drastic caseload increase between 2000 and 2005 by half. This rapid increase in caseload was triggered by a Great Recession and a shift in policy from Food Assistance Program families combining the assistance with other cash assistance programs to Food Assistance Program families with the absence of cash assistance programs and income (Klerman & Danielson, 2011). The Food Assistance Program caseload grew by 140 % in just ten years, from 2000 to 2010.

Within the last two decades, there has been a broad shift in the U.S. social safety net programs possibly causing a large portion of the caseload increase; the policymakers refocused the Food Assistance Program from assisting the non-working poor to low-income working families, as a motivation to promote people to work (Klerman & Danielson, 2011). Continued policy changes and reforms over the 2000s allowed states the flexibility to focus food assistance toward working families. Such changes have allowed easier access to the Food Assistance Program and restricted access to cash programs, hence increasing the caseload. According to Klerman and Danielson (2011) policy changes, reforms, and the Great Recession triggered a rapid caseload increase within two decades (Klerman & Danielson, 2011). The study focused on the roles of the policy changes, and the economy to get a more robust interpretation of the caseload increase over a 20-year span.

In more current research, Slack and Myers (2014) examined the geography of the program, the changes in Food Assistance Program recipients during and before the Great

Recession, and other characteristics associated with this result. Based on its geography, they examined the changes in Food Assistance Program recipients during and before the Great Recession, and other characteristics associated with this result. This quantitative study applied descriptive statistics to examine data pulled from the US Department of Agriculture. The findings show a substantial difference in Food Assistance Program usage during the downturn of the economy. The study concluded increased participation in the Food Assistance Program in areas that were affected by the Great Recession, where foreclosures and unemployment increased. These results embrace a variety of implications for the policy on the Food Assistance Program, especially during a time of economic downturn.

Although this program is administered by the states, it is funded by the federal government; the Food Assistance Program is structured as a safety net to supplement the food needs of low-income families under the income poverty threshold and prevent food insecurity (Benefits.gov, n. d.). According to Klerman and Danielson (2001), the Food Assistance Program was originally designed for non-working, no-income families. However, today the Food Assistance Program is meant to prevent hunger and reduce food insecurity by only supplementing the food needs of low-income families (Slack & Myers, 2014). Is it achieving its goal without additional food sources? Currently, a household of one person, with no income, can receive a maximum of \$194 a month; this distributes to less than \$6 per day for food; the amount decreases per person as more individuals are added to the group (Gunderson, 2015).

Although Gassman-Pines and Hill (2013) agree with Klerman and Danielson (2001) in the policy change affecting the increase in Food Assistance Program recipients and caseloads, Slack and Myers (2014) insist on a downturn in the economy and a Great Recession for increased participation in food assistance and caseload spike. However, Gundersen (2015) cites a 14 million participant increase and a fifty-billion-dollar increase since the Great Recession, even though the economy recovered. Most of the studies focus on the increase in participation of the program rather than the effectiveness of the program.

I have not encountered differing point of views from authors on the same subject until now. Although they don't agree on why the caseload increased, they do agree on the Food Assistance Program meeting the basic needs of low-income families. However, I disagree with all the authors in this area. An enormous amount of low-income families depends on private food assistance, such as food pantries and soup kitchens due to the failure of the public Food Assistance Program (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Families with no income are relying on additional food sources, such as food pantries and soup kitchens to meet their basic food needs.

Different points of view can benefit a qualitative researcher to identify different gaps in previous research to identify the issue that needs to be addressed. This opposition inspired some critical thinking on the subject; therefore, leading to richer data being presented. To get a better understanding of the problem, a researcher must broaden his viewpoints within the literature review (see Maxwell, 2013). This literature supports the Food Assistance Program in its ability to meet the basic needs of low-income families,

while my study questions the effectiveness of the program. This literature provided a rich perspective from the different views on the program. For example, Gassman-Pines and Hill (2013) and Slack and Myers (2014) point to the policy change in 1996 shifting the focus from no-income poor to the low-income working families. This perspective will offer a better analysis for my study which focuses on the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program.

Literature has documented both the positive and negative impact of the food assistance programs and their ability to reduce food insecurity. Research has also documented the effects of the Great Recession (Klerman & Danielson, 2011) and the link between the food assistance programs and obesity among adults and children (Nguyen et al., 2015). It has also been documented that families are forced to rely on multiple food programs and other sources to supplement their food needs (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Regardless where they live, program recipients are seeking additional means of food to survive. While the Food Assistance Program is reducing some food insecurity among working families with some income (Huffman & Jensen, 2008), other families with no income are not getting the minimum daily food needs (Daponte et al., 2004). Even though the result of the Food Assistance Program sounds grim, not all families have the same experience.

It is known that that families with no income are still experiencing food insecurity on the Food Assistance Program (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002; Daponte et al., 2004). It is also known there is a need to re-evaluate the formula used to determine benefits and make it more effective by ensuring low-income households have enough



food. There is little known about the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and its ability to provide food assistance for families with no income and access to alternative food sources. Researchers have cited the program effectively reduces food insecurity when it is combined with income and other food sources, such as food shelters and soup kitchens (Daponte et al., 2004).

Current program policy is geared towards assisting working families toward supplementing their food needs. What is not known, however, is the distribution mechanisms of the Federal Food Assistance Program and its ability to meet the basic food needs of families with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources in the United States. The PFT may provide insight into how on the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and understanding the needs of the entire population.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The Food Assistance Program is only able to increase food security when it is combined with other public and private food programs. Even then, families are still finding themselves with a food shortage at the end of the month. The policy shift from the no-income poor to working low-income was not beneficial for individuals and families with exhausted financial resources or in-between jobs. Families on the Food Assistance Program are forced to buy cheap food to stretch their buying power, causing preventable diseases, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. Researchers have called for an evaluation of the distribution formula used to determine the amount of food needed to reduce food insecurity.

This gap in the literature for the federal Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and its ability in meeting the food needs of families with little to no income and access to additional food sources. The next chapter will provide information on how this study was performed, how the participants were identified, the questions that were asked, and how the information was organized, coded and analyzed.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program distribution mechanisms in meeting the needs of individuals who have limited income and limited access to alternative food sources. This study was a case study in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States, which was selected given its large population of families living below the poverty level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), 25.1% of families are below the poverty level in the selected county in the Great Lakes region alone compared to 14.8% overall in the United States. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of the families on the Food Assistance Program with little to no income. In this case, a household of four people with at least two children was considered a family. The family was required to be participating in the Food Assistance Program and could have little to no access to income.

The information collected in the interviews (see Appendix B) were divided into factors and categories such as food security, food insecurity, additional food resources, and additional challenges. These factors and categories were measured in a thematic process and compared to each other for patterns regarding how effective the Food Assistance Program is in the studied county. These variables were in line and related to the theoretical construct of the study, which was the PFT. This theory has been used to evaluate different aspects of food assistance programs and is generally associated with

the works of policy analysis, ranging from evaluating existing policy to targeting social problems such as social well-being and economic efficiencies (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

The main research question was: How does policy feedback theory help explain the role of distribution mechanisms in helping the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals who have limited income and limited access to alternative food sources below the poverty level in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States? To help answer this principal research question, the following secondary question was designed: What are the role of ideas, actors, and networks in supporting the Food Assistance Program meet the needs of individuals with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources?

### **Research Methodology**

I used a qualitative method for this study on the Food Assistance Program and its distribution mechanisms. The qualitative method allowed me to explore the social problem by understanding the meaning of the groups involved (see Creswell, 2009). This method allowed me to explore the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program by answering my research questions to gain a better understanding of its ability to provide enough food for families with limited income and limited access to additional food sources along with its impact on the recipients. Furthermore, qualitative methods are often used for more flexible spontaneity, exploring a phenomenon in its natural environment (Rudestam & Newton, 2007), which fit the nature of this study. A

quantitative methodology was not selected for this study due to the lack of qualitative studies on the Food Assistance Program.

### **Research Design**

A research design is a plan guiding the researcher through a process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in a direct flow to answer specific research questions aligned with the purpose of this study (see Yin, 2008). This process served as a step-by-step framework for my research. A case study design was selected to examine the experiences of families participating in the Food Assistance Program and further understand the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program. The case study design was in alignment with my methodology, and research questions; due to a limited timeframe, this consistency provided an in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program (see Creswell, 2014).

Other relevant designs like phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative designs were considered but may have been less effective in providing the understanding necessary for families on the Food Assistance Program. This case study design was the best fit to examine a bounded system to gather information (see Creswell, 2014). The case study design was most applicable to this study and was selected because I was concerned with what is occurring over time and what was currently being experienced or has been experienced as the result of a phenomenon.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The research for this study was conducted by me as the researcher. I identified myself strictly as a doctoral student researching to be used exclusively for completing my

doctoral dissertation at Walden University. I discussed the proposed study with active program recipients over the phone. Once contact was made with interested participants, I served as the point of contact with participants. A letter describing the proposed study was also sent to the state located in the Great Lakes region of the United States for approval.

### **Procedures**

The following procedures served as a sequential guide for me as the researcher in recruiting and informing interview participants, collecting and analyzing the data, and validating the findings:

1. Contacted, via e-mail and telephone, DHHS to provide information about the study.
2. Requested approval to conduct the study from the county DHHS.
3. A letter was sent detailing the nature of the study to DHHS Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection and confidentiality of program participants, approval granted.
4. Posted recruitment flyers at local supermarkets in low-income cities of the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States and presented the study and provided a copy of the letter describing the study when contact was made.
5. Recruited participants to participate in the interviews. A sample of the interview questions was designed by me (see Appendix A, B, and C).

6. During initial contact from the recruitment flyer, each participant was mailed a copy of the letter describing the proposed study and a consent form. The initial contact captured and recruited 14 participants for a detailed interview at a local library (see Appendix A).
7. Interviews were conducted in a private meeting room in a safe and comfortable setting. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to steps outlined at the end of this chapter.
8. Data collected from the interviews were coded manually into chunks of information manually and analyzed in a thematic analysis process for patterns to interpret the information.

### **Ethical Issues and Participation**

Participation in this study was voluntary and confidential for all participants. Permission was granted by the county director of the DHHS and the DHHS IRB of the county located in the Great Lakes region of the United States. The participants in this study were adult males or females 21 or older representing a family of at least two children under the age of 18. Participants were recruited at three local supermarkets in the studied county that accepts the Food Assistance Program benefit cards. No known harm was associated with participating in this study.

Given that I am a state employee, I segregated my role as a civil servant to administer the study. I introduced myself as a Ph.D. candidate with Walden University. I kept my role objective and neutral, allowing the participants to provide information that

is not distorted, keeping the contact open and honest. My role as the researcher was communicated with the participants to prevent bias and distortion in the study.

All 14 participants were required to complete a consent form before participating. Each participant's confidentiality was protected on a password protected drive during the selection process and locked in a box before and after the interview. Interviews were conducted in a private meeting room at a local public library in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. Interviews, journals, files, and notes were stored on a password-protected drive and kept in a locked box in my home during all phases of the study. Only I have access to the interview notes, journals, and validated results. Identifying information was removed from journals and notes before data validation.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data for this study was collected through interviews. The first primary data source consisted of interviews with Food Assistance Program recipients from a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. The sample for this interview group consisted of 11 participants, heads of families, selected from three different low-income cities in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. These individuals were recruited from supermarkets that accept the Food Assistance Program benefit cards via random sampling from a recruitment flyer posted to recruit voluntary participants. The participants were required to be a family of at least two children under the age of 18 years and have minimal to no income. Studies have suggested families with



income and access to additional food sources experience less food insecurity (Daponte et al., 2004). Other studies suggest food security was only possible when families participated in multiple food programs along with the Food Assistance Program (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004).

Participants were recruited with an informational flyer posted in the “help wanted” sections of three major local supermarkets in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. The flyer consisted of general information about the study and my contact information. The recruitment process for limited income participants at local supermarkets where Food Assistance Program cards are accepted for potential volunteers was the desired strategy to recruit participants while guaranteeing confidentiality.

The interviews focused on the food needs of the participant with the intent to put the participant’s experience in the proper context. The initial contact was comprised of building rapport, signing the consent form, and gathering the interview information. Information gathered during initial contact provided further insight if the client qualified to participate in the final interview. The initial contact discovered if the participant met the age and family size requirements. The purpose of sharing the information was to assist in building rapport and developing credibility towards sharing their experiences objectively. No specific research questions were addressed during the initial contact. The initial contact was used to screen for participants with little to no income to participate in the one on one interviews.

The interviews also addressed the details of the participants' present experiences, by asking focused questions that stemmed from the research questions in this study. The interviews were conducted at a local library in a safe and comfortable setting that was free from distraction and ensured privacy. As a first step in the data analysis process, data were organized from the interviews to create and organize files as the first step towards beginning the analysis process (see Creswell, 2004). Interviews and files were preserved in a locked box in my workspace. The process of analyzing the information began once the data were detailed and transcribed.

The second source of primary data consisted of interviews with Food Assistance Program supervisors or middle managers (administrators) with the first-hand experience with distribution mechanisms. Managers and directors are experts and elaborated on the effects and changes of the distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program over the years.

The third data source consisted of documentaries and statistical reports on food assistance and Hunger in the United States. These data sources will provide corroborating evidence regarding getting multiple data sources, methods and theoretical schemes; to secure a reliable study. According to Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017), the additional focus on rigorous and relevant thematic analysis can also improve the credibility of the research process.

The data collection process was tedious and lengthy; therefore, the NVivo software was employed to manage the data. Although NVivo helped manage and sort the information, it did not code the data. Coding was necessary to reduce the ample data into

smaller amounts of information, in a meaningful and systematic way. The data coding process was conducted with open-coding. There were no pre-set codes, but I developed and modified the codes through the coding process. I manually coded the data; however, Microsoft Excel was also helpful in coding data (see Bree & Gallagher, 2016)

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was critical in the validation of qualitative research. Therefore, a theoretical thematic analysis method was conducted to identify patterns or themes for the qualitative data collected in the study. According to Braun and Clark (2006), a thematic analysis can identify themes (patterns) to summarize the data and make good sense of it. The first step of the data-gathering portion of my research was to understand the type of information the data conveyed, once the data were organized and then generated into initial codes. The next step was to begin listing statements in the text that had specific relevance to the phenomenon being studied. The proposed research was attempting to extract statements to understand how the Food Assistance Program affects families with little to no income.

Braun and Clark (2006) suggested a researcher employing a thematic analysis should become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, and write up, according to their six-phase framework. A theoretical thematic process assisted me with rich text information gathered from the interviews, to get a deep level analysis on both small and large levels of data gathered. This method and procedure of analysis of the data involved careful interpretation by me as the researcher, in interpreting the data. The data collected from the 14 participants in

the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States through the form of interviews were transcribed and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide.

A theoretical thematic analysis was conducted to look for data between and within themes for patterns and differences related to the research question in this study. I took the following steps, in order to interpret the collected data: read and re-read the transcripts from the interview questions, organized the data in meaningful and systematic way (generated initial codes through open-coding), searched for themes related to the research question, reviewed the themes (reviewed, modified, and developed each theme), defined each theme, and completed a final write up of my findings that will follow. The data identified several themes. Examples of patterns: School Breakfast, Lunch Program, Food Pantries, Soup Kitchens, Food Shortage, Food Security, Food Insecurity, Food Assistance, and hardships.

### **Verification of Validity**

Reliability and validity were evaluated in this qualitative research study by me as the researcher checking the accuracy of the findings, using specific procedures such as triangulation, descriptions, and bias clarification. In this research, I strived for consistency throughout the study with stringent documentation of the processes (see Creswell, 2009). Triangulation also ensured a comprehensive, rich, and robust account for the qualitative researcher (see Patton, 2002).

### **Triangulation**

Data source and data-point triangulation were used in this study, to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data, establishing consistency among the data, and arriving at the evidence for reasonable conclusions. Participants were recruited from three different low-income areas (cities) within a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States, to enhance the data-point reliability for the validation of consistency in my findings. Likewise, the Food Assistance program directors or middle manager (administrators) interviews were recruited from personnel from different DHHS districts across the selected county in the Great Lakes region of the United States. The third data source was gathered from documentaries and statistical information that focused on food assistance and Hunger in the United States. These different data sources provided corroborating evidence regarding getting multiple data sources, methods and theoretical schemes and secured a reliable study. According to Nowell et al. (2017), the additional focus on rigorous and relevant thematic analysis improved the credibility of my research process.

### **Reliability**

There are two issues that could have affected this study regarding reliability and validity. First, I work for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) as a manager which could be a conflict of interest and could have affected the reliability of the study. However, I segregated my civil service role entirely during the process and presented myself strictly as a Ph.D. candidate from Walden University. Secondly, I grew up on the benefits; therefore, I clarified any bias from the outset of the study so that the

reader understands my position to ensure the evidence of trustworthiness and quality of my research. My research employed peer review and debriefing, to clarify researcher bias, member checks, and rich, thick description (see Creswell, 2009).

Clarification of researcher bias was critically important in this study. The reader needs to understand the researcher's position about this topic (see Creswell, 1998). I was a former recipient of the Food Assistance Program. During my adolescence, I experienced increased stress and anxiety from food insecurity while participating in the Food Assistance Program. Feeling hungry and scared were common occurrences. Verifying the findings kept the essence of qualitative inquiry intact (see Creswell, 2009). I was cognizant of my experiences and bracketed them accordingly to ensure the integrity of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to address the issue of hunger by broadening understanding of the role distribution mechanisms supporting the capacity of the federal Food Assistance Program for individuals with limited income and access to alternative food sources. The principal research question was: How does policy feedback theory help explain the role of distribution mechanisms in helping the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals with limited income and limited access to alternative food sources living under the poverty level in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States? To help answer this principal research question, I developed a secondary question: What role do ideas, actors, and networks play in supporting the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources? The data collected for this study were gathered to answer these research questions.

### **Demographics**

Participant demographics and characteristics relevant to the study included 11 Food Assistance Program recipients and three program administrators from the DHHS in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. This study allowed the participants and administrators an opportunity to share their personal experiences with the Food Assistance Program (see Appendices B & C). All the interviews were conducted in a private setting at a local library in the studied county.

All 14 participants were recruited through flyers posted at the local supermarkets and e-mailed to the county DHHS administrators. Potential parent participants were informed by the flyer that they had to live in the local county, be actively receiving food assistance, have a family of at least four people, and have little to no income to be selected for the study. By answering “yes” to these questions, completing the initial participant contact interview, and agreeing to be interviewed allowed them to participate in the study and share their experiences. Potential administrator participants were informed by an e-mailed flyer to the county DHHS that they had to be an administrator of the Food Assistance Program in the local county. Answering “yes” to the question and agreeing to be interviewed allowed them to share their experiences in administering the Food Assistance Program because managers are experts and can elaborate on the effects and changes of the distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program over the years.

The study included a purposeful sampling mix of male and female adults over 18 years of age, living in the selected county, and participating in the Food Assistance Program with little to no income or working for the selected DHHS as an administrator. The personal information of all participants has been kept confidential. The names used in the responses are changed to numbers to protect the identity of the participants in the study (see Tables 1 & 2).



Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Marital status	Income	Family size
1	Female	Single	No	4
2	Female	Married	Yes	6
3	Male	Widowed	Yes	4
4	Female	Married	No	7
5	Male	Married	Yes	5
6	Female	Single	Yes	5
7	Female	Single	No	4
8	Female	Divorced	No	5
9	Female	Single	No	4
10	Female	Divorced	No	4
11	Female	Divorced	No	5

Table 2

*Administrator Demographics and Experience Level*

Administrator	Gender	Years of service	Level	Caseload
1	Female	15	2nd line manager	77,000
2	Female	18	2nd line manager	75,000
3	Female	30	2nd line manager	76,000

### **Data Collection**

Random sampling was used to identify participants for the study. Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews and participant observation. Participants were asked questions from an interview guide created by me. To ensure the accuracy of statements, handwritten notes were used to collect responses. The sample size included 14 participants: 11 individuals (families) participating in the Food Assistance Program and three program administrators in the selected county.

Identifying myself as a Ph.D. candidate, there were no obstacles in gaining access to parent participants on the Food Assistance Program. Program administrator participants were accessed with permission from the selected county DHHS director, allowing access and preventing any issues of trust and understanding. Although many DHHS offices in the selected county were aware of my study, it was difficult to interview more than three program administrators due to the long work hours and heavy caseloads. Many of them were either too busy or unavailable.

All the interviews were conducted at a local library in the selected county in the Great Lakes region in a safe, quiet, and private setting with a duration of 1 hour each day. All participants' personal information and identities were carefully protected and not included in the research results. Each participant in the study was identified as a number. All the data collected will be secured in a box for seven years at my home office.

The interview questions (Appendix C) covered several themes: food programs participation, benefit adequacy, food shortage, and additional food resources. The interviews were kept open and honest. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and

clarify answers when needed. To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness, all questions and responses were rechecked and verified by the participants at the end of each interview. There were no variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. There were no unusual circumstances encountered in data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The method and procedure of analysis of the data involved careful interpretation by me. NVivo software helped organize the data, sorting and managing all the collected information. A large amount of data collected was systematically coded by hand, reducing the data into smaller amounts of information. The data coding process was conducted with open-coding. Themes were identified through theoretical thematic analysis. The theoretical thematic analysis helped identify themes (patterns) to summarize the data and make sense of it (see Braun & Clark, 2006). The thematic analysis also helped me become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define the themes, and create a write-up, according to Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase framework. The thematic analysis process allowed for a deeper look into the data, between and within themes for patterns and differences.

During the thematic analysis, I listed statements in the text that had relevance to the phenomenon being studied, extracting statements to understand how the Food Assistance Program affects families with little to no income. Participant responses revealed that many families experience anxiety, depression, and shame due to food shortages and program policy bureaucracy. Participants were also frustrated with

economic inflation and the cost of food. According to the participant responses analyzed through the chosen coding method, six related themes emerged:

1. Participation in the school breakfast and lunch programs
2. Insufficient Food Assistance Program benefits
3. Monthly food shortages.
4. Additional food resources monthly
5. Added anxiety, stress, and shame
6. Food program benefit formula should be re-evaluated.

After participant response analysis, all participant recipients and administrators were in line with their responses, revealing the need to reevaluate the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms benefit formula. The participants in this study reported similar experiences and the administrators validated them. There were no discrepant responses. All responses will be detailed in the Results section of this chapter.

### **Policy Feedback Theory**

The PFT helped examine the Food Assistance Program process because it provided the feedback effects, providing insight of the ability of the policy or program that can encourage policymakers to correct and create improved policy (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). In this study the theoretical framework helped to focus on social well-being or economic efficiency, aiming to solve social problems or to evaluate the existing policy. Additionally, the theory provided a focus on the ideas, actors, and networks involved in the Food Assistance Program (see Mettler & Sorelle, 2014).

According to the emerging themes, the program is ineffective without participation in other food programs and other resources, and the benefits alone do not reduce food shortages. The data shows that distribution mechanisms were significant for participants. For example, not having enough benefits on their electronic benefit transaction card each month brought added anxiety, stress, and shame. The data shows that reducing the monthly benefits or inadequate benefits force clients to seek additional resources and introduce unnecessary barriers. The data also shows the distribution mechanisms for the Food Assistance Program benefit formula should be reevaluated.

### **The Role of Ideas**

The ideas in the PFT refer to the aim or purpose of the program or policy. Though the Food Assistance Program was created to prevent hunger in the United States, according to the emerging themes, the program is not effective in preventing hunger, food shortage, or food insecurity. The previous policy shifts supplemented the food needs of low-income working residents under the income poverty threshold instead of feeding them completely (Benefits.gov, n. d.). However, according to the data, families on the Food Assistance Program rely on private food banks to compensate for food shortages. This study confirms that families participating in the program were likely to run out of food before the end of the month.

### **The Role of Actors**

The actors in the PFT refer to the participants in the process (or actions) in the program or policy. In this study, the policymakers in the United States Congress are the actors. Food policy has always been determined by policymakers in Congress since the

implementation of the program. These actors can terminate, change, or replace programs that were designed to provide food and nutrition assistance to prevent food insecurity. For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 refocused the program toward meeting food needs for working families living under the federal poverty limit instead of feeding them completely if certain household members fulfilled work requirements, or education and training mandates. However, according to the emerging themes in this study, participants did not always have a consistent income to supplement their food needs, and some had no income. Many of the participants were either in-between jobs, exhausted their unemployment, or did not receive their child support payments timely. These barriers have forced families on the program to rely on additional food programs and resources to reduce food insecurity (Oberholser & Tuttle, 2004).

### **The Role of Networks**

The networks in the PFT refer to the groups or systems of the program or policy, which in this study relates to the private and public food networks associated with the Food Assistance program. Private food networks have helped many Americans meet their basic food needs because they are not served properly by the Food Assistance Program. The two largest private programs are food pantries and soup kitchens. According to the data in this study, a significant amount of families on the Food Assistance Program were relying on the private network of food pantries and soup kitchens to meet their basic food needs. Public food networks are another reliable source for Food Assistance Program participants. According to Nichols-Casebolt and Morris (2002), the USDA operates 13

additional public food assistance programs to address food insecurity in the United States. The larger programs include the WIC and the School Breakfast and National School Lunch programs. However, the Food Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, is still the largest, most reliable federal food program because it expands to all Americans regardless of whether they have children (Nichols-Casebolt & Morris, 2002). Despite these programs, according to the data in this study, many working families still must rely on additional resources to cover food shortages.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

There are four major criteria to gauge reliability and trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All four criteria were addressed through the reliability and validity evaluated in this qualitative research study by me. This process includes checking the accuracy of the findings throughout the research and after using triangulation, descriptions, and bias clarification. I strived for consistency throughout the study with documentation of the processes (see Creswell, 2009). Triangulation also ensured a comprehensive account of the qualitative data (see Patton, 2002).

There were two issues of concern affecting the reliability and trustworthiness of my research. First, I work for the DHHS, creating a conflict of interest that may have affected the reliability of the study. However, I segregated my role as a civil servant during the process and only presented myself as a Ph.D. candidate from Walden University. Second, I grew up on public assistance, which may have created a personal

bias; clarifying this bias ensures the evidence of trustworthiness and quality of the research.

My research was also peer reviewed and debriefed to clarify researcher bias and conducted member checks for rich descriptions (see Creswell, 2009). Clarification of researcher bias was critical in the study, so the readers could understand my position about this topic (see Creswell, 1998). The findings were verified to keep the essence of qualitative inquiry intact (see Creswell, 2009). I was conscious of my experiences and bracketed them accordingly to ensure the integrity of this study.

### **Triangulation**

Data source and data-point triangulation were used in this study to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data, establishing consistency among the data and arriving at the evidence for reasonable conclusions. Eleven participants were recruited from three different low-income areas (cities) within the county in the Great Lakes region of the United States to enhance the data-point reliability for the validation of consistency in my findings. Likewise, three Food Assistance Program administrators from the DHHS were recruited from personnel from different districts across the selected county. The third data source was gathered from three documentaries and statistical information focused on food assistance and hunger in the United States. These different data sources provided corroborating evidence regarding getting multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes and secured a reliable study. Additionally, focusing on rigorous and relevant thematic analysis improved the credibility of my research process (see Nowell et al., 2017).



## **Results**

### **Research Questions**

The responses of the participants revealed six themes that relate to the central research question:

1. Participating in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs.
2. Monthly Food Assistance Program benefits are not enough.
3. Monthly food shortages.
4. Seeking additional food resources monthly.
5. Added anxiety, depression, and shame.
6. Food program benefit formula should be re-evaluated.

### **Supporting Data**

During the face-to-face interviews, all 14 participants answered predetermined interview questions (Appendix C). Each participant described their experiences and feelings with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States, along with personal demographics, such as family size, marital status, and access to income. While transcribing the interviews, it was clear most of the responses were related to themes of inadequate monthly Food Assistance Program benefits for each family size, as well as experiences with anxiety, depression, and shame due to food shortages and program policy bureaucracy.

Most of the participant responses related to three or more of the stated themes. Although all participant and administrator responses were in line with each other, one

administrator was persistent the benefits can be enough with additional resources but not for special culture diets. Although her responses did fit into most of the other resulting themes, she agreed the program is outdated. All the participant recipients suggested breakfast, and lunch meals were skipped if families were not participating in the School Breakfast, Lunch and Summer Food Programs. All participants and most administrators believed monthly Food Assistance Program benefits are not adequate for each family size. On average, all participant recipient families ran out of food on average four days a month, and additional food resources are sought on average twice a month. Most of the participants and administrators believe the program changes continue to hinder participating families with possible future employment and their ability to thrive in society. All participants and administrators strongly stated the Food Assistance Program distribution mechanisms benefit formula is outdated and should be re-evaluated.

All participants and administrators' responses led to the themes of monthly food benefits are not enough, the need to seek additional food sources, and the Food Assistance Program's need to be reevaluated. Other participant responses led to the themes of participating in School Breakfast and Lunch programs, food shortages, and added anxiety, depression, and shame.

### **Data from Program Participants**

Participant 1 is a single female with three kids. She is currently not working and has no income. She participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Program. She does not visit food pantries or soup kitchens. She runs out of food 4-5 days a month and believes the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated. She related her

experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

I can't afford to make breakfast and lunch for three kids every day, so the Breakfast and Lunch Programs help conserve for dinner meals. I feel like the government does not account for all food items and costs. Towards the end of each month, we always run out of food and benefits. My worker does not help and makes me feel less of a person when I ask for more. She refers me to local food pantries. My car is not working currently, and I do not have the money to fix it. This hardship makes it difficult to go to food pantries and soup kitchens. The benefits need to be re-evaluated! They are not enough when you are out of work or in-between jobs. We try to make it work by skipping meals and buying cheaper foods items. I find myself anxious and depressed not knowing if we have enough food for our next meal.

Although Participant 1 is solely relying on the Food Assistance Program, she is still looking for a job. She finds it hard to focus on the job market when she is always worried about her next meal. She has a pile of job applications waiting for her at home, hoping to land a job interview soon. She exhausted her unemployment last year.

Participant 2 is a married female with four kids. Her husband is currently working odd jobs providing some income to the household. She relies on the Food Assistance Program to supplement what they already have. They occasional run out of food. Her family participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. They use it as an extra meal if they don't have enough food at home to pack for school. They do not run out of

food often, but sometimes they do. Weekends and summers are a challenge. She sends the kids to the park in the summer to get a free lunch through the Summer Lunch Program. The WIC program was helpful when her kids were infants; however, her kids have aged out. They refuse to visit food pantries or soup kitchens due to their special cultural diet. Although she tries to make it work with some income, she believes the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated; it is not enough for them. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

Food in this country is too expensive. Any extra food program that I participate in can help conserve our meals at home. The breakfast, lunch, and summer programs are helpful. The WIC program helped so much when my kids were younger. Baby formula is costly. Now my kids only eat adult food. I don't visit pantries due to our special diet. We do not run out of food much because I participate in any program I can to prevent that. However, some months we do! It is a lot of work! It is a full-time job. I do not know what we would do if my husband did not work odd jobs, bringing some income home. I believe the program should be re-evaluated. Why should we have to participate in four or five programs to have enough food to eat? It should be just one program until we get back on our feet.

Participant 2 believes it is a full-time job participating in multiple food programs. She is grateful that her husband is working, but she could never have time to find a job while ensuring her family has enough to eat. Although her family can make it work and get by with participation in multiple food programs with some income to the household, she

believes the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated. The income is not enough for living expenses and food.

Participant 3 is a widowed male with three kids. He is currently working a minimum wage job and earning some income. He participates in the School and Lunch Programs because he cannot afford to pack lunches for his kids. On the weekend they eat breakfast or lunch at his mother's home. He runs out of food about ten days a month. He often feels stress, depression, and hunger. He visits food pantries twice a month. Occasionally, when his food is low, they will visit soup kitchens. Although he works and receives subsidized housing, and earns some income, he believes the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated. He related his experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

I am grateful for the help, but it is not enough! I cannot feed the kid's breakfast, lunch, and dinner. My biggest concern is dinner. The benefits are not enough. I have explained this to my worker many times. The stress and pressure make it hard to function at work every day. I also have trouble sleeping sometimes. I am grateful to have subsidized housing. I don't know what I would do if I lost my job or if I had to pay more for rent. They need to take another look at the program.

Participant 3 is doing the best he can with what he has. He finds it hard to thrive at work when he is always worried about his next meal. He feels the income he earns barely pays the bills. Therefore, how can he supplement any food for his family the government does

not provide with the food benefits? He hopes to earn more income in the future, to stop worrying and stressing so much. He looks forward to a good night sleep, one day.

Participant 4 is a married female with five kids. Her husband lost his job a few months ago for not showing up to work. He has chronic back pain. He was denied disability benefits. Therefore, there is currently no household income. She applied for cash benefits with the state but hasn't participated in the work requirements yet, so she cannot access them. Her family is solely relying on the food benefits, currently. They participate in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. They send the kids to the park in the summertime to get a free lunch. They run out of food 10-15 days a month. She and her husband feel embarrassed to ask for additional help. She is ashamed to go to food pantries. She believes the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

We are in a tight spot. My husband is unable to work, and they will not give him disability benefits. It is hard feeding seven people in one household. When the kids are in school, they can secure a lunch through the lunch program. In the summer, it is difficult, so I send them to the park for a free lunch. We never have enough to eat. The government does not provide enough benefits for our family size. I am ashamed to go to food pantries and soup kitchens. All food programs should be on one card, to save the families time and dignity. We cannot afford to run around town for additional help. Our caseworker never helps! My husband and I are stressed out and frustrated, triggering martial problems.

Participant 4 and her family are facing hard times, with her husband's back problems. She is unable to work in the summer. She is the only one that can care for her family. It is difficult for her to visit soup kitchens and food pantries. It would be easier for all the benefit programs to be available on one card until they can get back on their feet.

Participant 5 is a married male with three kids. He works and has some income. His family participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch programs. He believes the monthly food benefits are not enough, even though he works full time. He can barely pay his bills. His household runs out of food on average seven days a month. He related his experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

I work full time, and I still don't make enough to pay my all the bills and feed my household. My wife will work odd jobs during the school year when the kids are at school, but summers are tough, and we struggle more. We have to rely on the Food Stamps to supplement what we have. Some months are harder than others depending on the bills or occasions. The School Breakfast and Lunch Programs help. In the summer we look for parks that offer the Summer Lunch Program. I visit the food pantry twice a month. They will not allow more than two visits a month. I don't like to take my kids to soup kitchens; they are dirty. They need to re-evaluate the amount of benefits they give people. This would reduce the amount of stress and anxiety my family must go through. We are forced to buy the cheapest food items to maximize our benefits.

Participant 5 believes the amount of benefits the state gives is not realistic. Although he is grateful for the help, his family finds themselves food insecure about seven days a month. His income is used for the household bills and other expenses. The state counts that income against him and reduces their benefit amount. He wishes they took into consideration the cost of living and rising food costs. He worries about the quality of the food he feeds his family, to make it work each month.

Participant 6 is a single female with four children. She is receiving Unemployment Compensation Benefits and Child Support payments. Although she has some income, she is worried because the Unemployment Compensation will run out soon and her Child Support payments are inconsistent. Most of the time, the fathers of the children do not pay on time. They run out of food 3-5 days a month. She participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. She barely has enough to pay for her monthly rent, so she relies on the Food Assistance Program to feed her family. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

I was laid off four months ago and been receiving unemployment since that time. It helps me pay the rent and keep the lights on. The Food Stamps help feed us. In the summer it is hard because the kids do not get a free lunch. During the school year, my kids get a free lunch which helps me focus only on dinner items. I send them to the local park to play and get a free lunch sometimes. We always need more! It is not easy feeding four kids. I try to stretch the benefits, but I hate buying cheap food items. Most of the time, I have no choice. I find myself visiting



food pantries twice a month. I am only allowed two bags of food items every two weeks at the local food pantry. We do not like to use soup kitchens; they are dirty. The Food Stamps are not enough! If they were, I would not have to visit a food pantry every two weeks.

Participant 6 is worried and stressed the state would not extend her Unemployment Compensation Benefits. She is concerned about her rent first and then food. If the Child Support payments were more consistent, this would help her with buying more quality food items. She is due back in court next month to request more Child Support from one of the fathers of her children. He has a good job but refuses to help her with the kids.

Participant 7 is a married female with five kids. Her husband works a minimum wage job, so they have some household income. He lost his job a few years ago at the factory, so he had to start over. He is taking classes online at night to reinvent himself. They rely on the Food Assistance Program to supplement their food needs. They participate in the School Breakfast and Lunch Program. They do not run out of food because they budget and stretch each dollar, along with their monthly food benefits. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

Until they increase my husband's wages, the government will have to feed our family. My husband had a good job and made decent money, but he was eventually laid off. We rely on the Food Assistance Program, but they will only supplement the household income. Furthermore, most of our income goes to household expenses. We use the School Lunch Program to secure a meal for our

kids in school. What they give our family is not enough. We skip meals to get through the week, so we do not run out of food. It's very stressful, but we make it work. They need to re-evaluate the food program and reduce the paperwork involved. Every few months they send me paperwork and stress me out. They never answer the phone or return phone calls at the DHHS.

Participant 7 stretches each dollar her husband earns and all the benefits the state provides. She is currently looking for a job but has not had any luck. She didn't graduate from high school, so it is tough for her in the job market. She knows how to stretch and conserve, so her family does not have to suffer without food. However, just because her family does not experience food shortages, they still experience hunger. This hardship has taken an emotional toll on the family is.

Participant 8 is a single female with four kids. She currently has no income. She is in-between jobs. She receives Section 8 (subsidized housing benefits), so she is not responsible for any monthly rent payments. Every time her gas and electricity bill is past due; she relies on the state to pay it for her. They run out of food 2-3 days a month. Her family participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs and are solely relying on the Food Assistance Program for all their food needs at home. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

We are grateful for the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs during the school year. These programs guarantee my children breakfast and lunch meals during the day. These secured meals help stretch our food items at home. I do not believe the

benefits are enough for my family size. We always run out of food each month.

This hardship forces me to seek additional resources instead of a job. The summers are hard because I have to provide more meals for my family. I do not have a car right now so visiting food pantries is hard when I must catch the bus. I wish they would re-evaluate the program and secure my family more food until I get back on my feet. A few months ago, my kids got sick from eating cheap food items from the local gas station.

Participant 8 solely relies on the Food Assistance Program during the summer. She is unable to visit food pantries because her vehicle has been impounded for unpaid parking tickets. Her monthly benefit amount runs out quick if she buys higher quality ingredients. They find themselves buying cheaper food items from the local gas stations and party stores. Currently, there are no supermarkets in her area, but they are building a Meijer's a few blocks away.

Participant 9 is a divorced female with four kids. She has some income from Child Support and shares custody of her kids with her ex-husband. She is going to school full time and does not have time to work. Her ex-husband makes too much money for the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, so she solely relies on the Food Assistance Program. They run out of food about six days a month. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

Life is hard for a divorced mother with four kids. My ex-husband only takes the kids on the weekends, so the weekdays are hard for me. When we used to get the

School Breakfast and Lunch Program, it was a little bit easier but when they found out my ex-husband makes too much they took it away. My monthly food benefits are not enough. They count my children's child support income against us and reduce our benefits. My monthly income barely covers my living expenses. I have been using my student loans to pay for school and my rent. It's easier for me to skip meals on the weekend when the kids are with their father. They need to re-evaluate the program and take all these things into consideration.

Participant 9 is unable to work because she goes to school full time. Her Child Support income barely covers the household expenses. Her kids do not qualify for the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, currently. She believes that food costs are too high to get through the entire month without running out of food. She does not have time to visit food pantries, so she finds it easier to skip meals and send the kids to their father. She hopes the federal government takes another look at day to day expenses and the rising cost of food. She often finds herself anxious about running out of food.

Participant 10 is a single female with three kids. She has no income. She was relying on Child Support until the fathers of her children stopped paying support. Her family participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. She runs out food 1-2 days a month. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

My kids participate in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. It helps a lot during the school year, but the summers are difficult. During the school year,

school lunch helps a lot. School lunch meals help conserve more food for our dinners while securing a meal for the kids. I do not believe the Food Assistance Program provides enough benefits. We always run out of food. Food shortage puts a strain on our family because I have to spend my gas money visiting food pantries across the city. I find myself stressed out and anxious. I do not like visiting soup kitchens because they are nasty. I do not know how they expect me to feed three kids with just \$367 of benefits per month. They need to change this program and get rid of all those caseworkers that do not help.

Participant 10 was doing okay when she had some Child Support income. Once she had to rely solely on the Food Assistance Program, things got worse for her family. She found herself visiting food pantries across the city and spending money she didn't have on gas money. She is frustrated with the bureaucracy of the program and the department. She wishes they would fix the program and hire case managers that would help the public.

Participant 11 is a single female with four kids. She has some income. She participates in the School Breakfast and Lunch Program. She runs out of food 3-4 days a month. She believes the program is broken. She related her experiences with the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

How can I feed my kids a quality meal with so little benefits? I work part-time cleaning homes and offices, and they count that against me. The money I earn barely covers rent and gas money. The state helps me with my gas and electric bill but only in the winter. We try to consolidate meals during the summer when there

is no school. School meals help. When we run out of food, my neighbor and I take turns visiting the food pantries and split the food. I wish they would re-evaluate the program and take into consideration the cost of food items and inflation. The stress and frustration of working so hard and not getting anywhere are truly depressing. They need to fix our broken system. The food I feed my kids is cheap and unhealthy because that is all we can afford, to reduce monthly food shortages.

Participant 11 believes she can reduce the number of days they run out of food if they buy cheaper food items. However, they still run out of food 3-4 days a month. She believes the program is ineffective and unrealistic without participating in multiple food programs with some monthly income. Even then, she feels quality food items are out of the question while trying to reduce food shortages.

#### **Data from Program Administrators**

Administrator 1 is a female that has worked for the Department of Health and Human Services administrating the Food Assistance Program for 15 years. She manages 110 case managers and supervisors that maintain 77,000 food cases in her district. She related her experiences administrating the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

The program has changed at least four different times over the last 15 years, each time adding sanctions and reducing the benefits for clients. These changes include Time Limited Food Assistance (TLFA), felony restrictions, and benefits reductions, leading recipients from one hardship to another. In my opinion, the program has been helpful for some but not others. The disabled, seniors and

families without income suffer the most. It may be effective for families or single adults in urban areas but not for everyone else in rural areas. Rural areas have food deserts, where there are limited supermarkets and resources, and unreachable resources such as food pantries and soup kitchens. The program does not provide enough benefits for families without income. It only works with additional resources and some income. Quality food items are not possible with the limited food benefits. I strongly believe the program should be re-evaluated. The program may be helpful in reducing poverty and hunger, but it could be contributing to health issues such as preventable diseases like obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

Administrator 1 is passionate about her job and helping people. She believes families without income, disabled individuals, and seniors suffer the most with hunger. Rising food costs and limited benefits force families to eat cheaper food items. Hence, causing other epidemics such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. She has only seen benefits go down and not up, over the past 15 years. The federal government needs to take another look at the program and be more realistic for the entire population.

Administrator 2 is a female that has worked for the department administrating the Food Assistance Program for almost 18 years. She manages 95 case managers and supervisors that maintain 75,000 food cases in her district. She related her experiences administrating the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

The federal government has drastically changed a couple of times if I can remember correctly. These changes were things like work requirements added to

the program. These changes were supposed to help clients find a job, requiring them to work to collect food benefits. These work requirements were so bad for the state they had to add a waiver for our state because the unemployment rate was so high (over 10%). I believe the Food Assistance Program is helpful towards poverty, allowing low-income families to use their limited income towards other rising expenses. However, the food program is only effective with some income and other resources. It can be effective among families with no income! The program does not provide enough monthly benefits to feed a family entirely. However, clients will have to maximize all other available resources to get by. Furthermore, the program is outdated and needs to be re-evaluated. The cost of living and inflation has outdated the program.

Administrator 2 believes the program is not keeping up with inflation. Families without income and access to additional resources will suffer the most. Quality foods are not possible with limited benefits for families. The federal government should not let the TLFA waiver expire in the state and re-evaluate the distribution mechanisms for the program based on the cost of living and inflation. The waiver is set to expire at the end of 2018. She believes these actions can also reduce fraud and the selling of food benefits for cash.

Administrator 3 is a female that has worked for the department administering the Food Assistance Program for almost 30 years. She manages 110 case managers and supervisors that maintain 76,000 food cases in her district. She related her experiences



administrating the Food Assistance Program in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States:

I have seen the program change drastically about two times during my career. I think when they shifted from food stamps to electronic benefit transactions it was beneficial to the public. However, the TLFA was not a good change. The idea of TFLA was to force people to work to get food benefits in the state, but that allowed some people to fall through the cracks. Many people are still having trouble finding jobs. Thank god there is a waiver in the state, but it is due to expire at the end of the year for this county. I believe the program can be effective on the one hand but hindering on the other. Clients have different barriers that may cause the program to hinder their family. These barriers include transportation, education, and resources. The program can be enough if they apply it with other food programs and some income. I believe I could make it work if I had to live on the program. However, I strongly believe the program should be re-evaluated and be more realistic to the different family barriers and the cost of food.

Administrator 1 believes the program has been very beneficial to many families but difficult for others across the state. Nonetheless, the program needs to be more realistic to rising food costs and family barriers that are hindering families across the state. She strongly believes the program's distribution mechanisms should be re-evaluated to help all people versus some.

## Documentaries and Studies

*A Place at The Table* is a documentary about hunger in America. It focused on families with children experiencing hunger. It explored the impact of hunger on families with children. These impacts included goals, long-term goals, and education. This documentary looked at the correlation between poverty and obesity, suggesting some potential solutions to hunger and improving the national food system.

What was discovered is some people are ashamed to acknowledge they are suffering from hunger and the effects of hunger such as added stress, anxiety, depression, and preventable health risks. Moreover, one out of every two kids in the United States will be on the federal Food Assistance Program, eventually at some point. The average food stamp benefit is \$3.00 a day. This generation will eventually get sick and die younger from the available food compared to previous generations. As many as 50 million Americans rely on charitable food programs to reduce food insecurity. It is important to note, although charity is a great gesture, it doesn't end hunger. Public policy can work only with the right representation to changes policies toward food and food programs.

*FOOD, INC* is a documentary that explored the corporate agriculture industry exposing how farming is harming people, animals, and the environment. Experts discuss how factory farming, food safety, and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) play an important factor towards health and hunger. Although feeding people may be the first step to solving the hunger problem, self-sufficiency is the goal. Self-sufficiency is not possible with rising food costs, unsafe farming, and genetically modified foods. Many

families continue to suffer from providing well-balanced meals so they can thrive in society. Limited income and food benefits force families to buy cheaper food items that are unhealthy and affecting their health. Cheap food items put children and adults at risk with obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

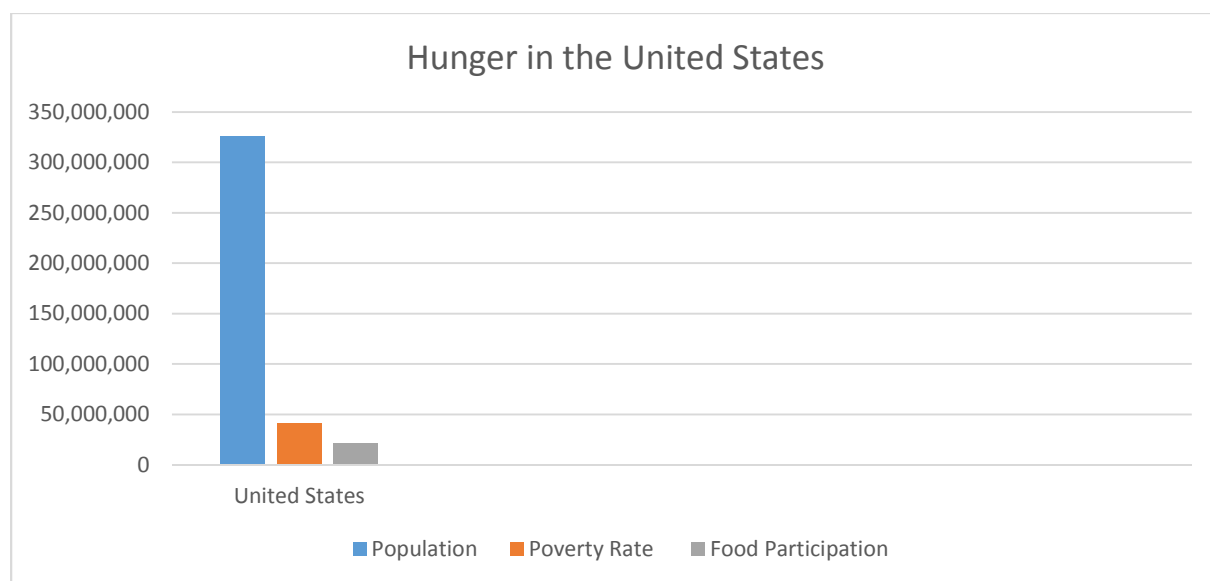
Food cost is the result of unhealthy eating. Economic hardship forces families to stretch their income and food assistance benefits. Buying a family size bag of chips is much cheaper than fresh fruits and vegetables. A study conducted on food costs suggested healthier foods are \$550 more a year on average (Rao, Afshin, Singh, & Mozaffarian, 2013). This cost difference is extremely burdensome for a family with limited or no income, hence resulting in a poor diet. This difference in cost is about \$1.50 more per day for about a \$5.00 food budget per person per day for healthier food items. A diet full of processed foods and snacks is much cheaper than a diet full of fruits, vegetables, and fish (Rao et al., 2013). Unhealthy food is 30 % cheaper than healthier food. These price differences leave families no choice and may lead to health problems, creating a strain for the Medicaid program and the healthcare system.

These third data sources are in line and support the emerging themes inducted from the primary and secondary data collected from the study participants. According to the primary and secondary data sources in this study, families in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States will continue to experience such burdens of added stress, anxiety, depression, and preventable health risks. The participants in this study also elected to capitalize this 30 % purchasing power to maximize their monthly food benefits, consuming cheaper food items. Although

this reduced some food insecurity, it still did not prevent monthly food shortages and introduced other possible health risks. Nonetheless, families still experience food insecurity. Families in all data sources rely on additional food resources with or without income while participating in the Food Assistance Program.

### Statistics from Third Party Sources

According to the United States Census (2016), in the United States, the population was 325,719,178, with 63% of that population in the labor force and a per capita income of \$29,829. However, 12.7% were living under the federal poverty level during (United States Census, 2016). Of these numbers, 21.8 million households participated in the Food Assistance Program during (USDA, 2016).



*Figure 1.* Hunger in the United States.

In the state of this study, the population was 9,962,311 during (United States Census, 2016). 15 percent of the population were living below the poverty level, with a

per capita income of \$27,549. 61 percent were active in the labor force. 777,906 households were participating in the Food Assistance Program with an average monthly benefit per household \$232.22.

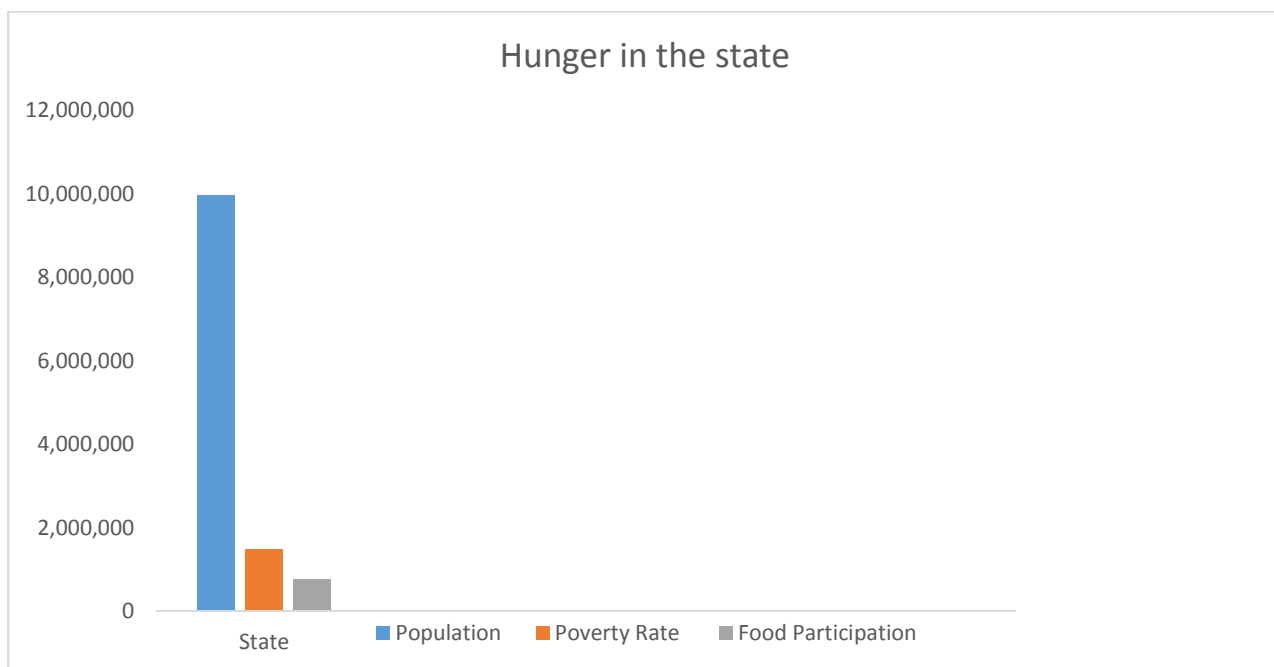
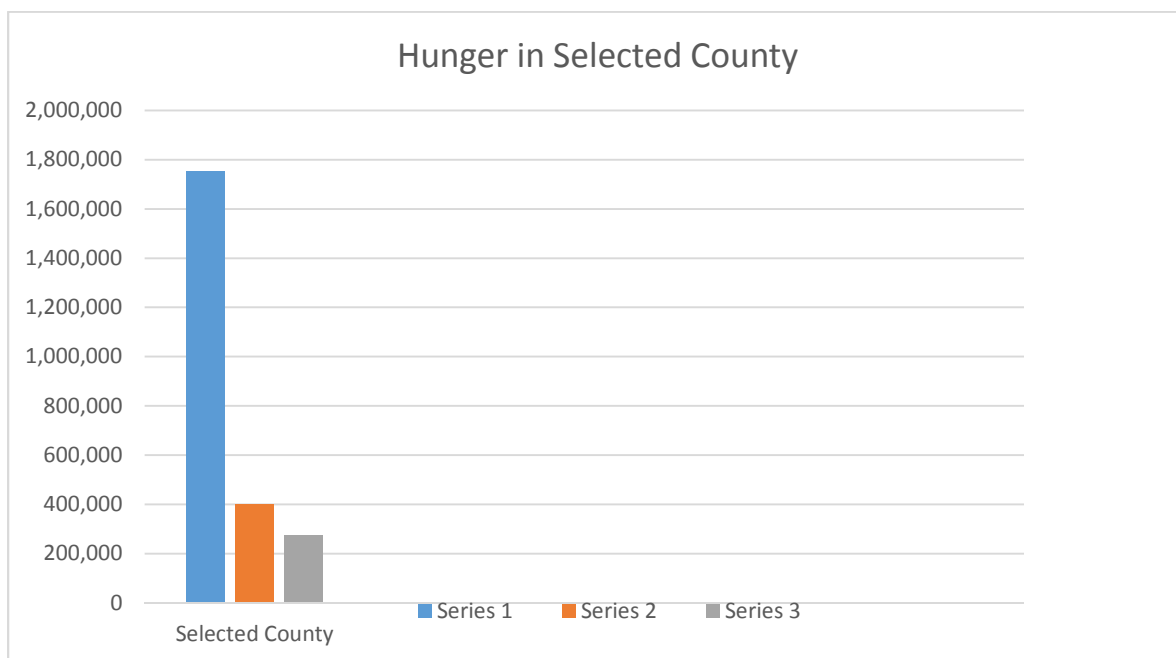


Figure 2. Hunger in the entire state of the selected county.

The population in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States is 1,753,616 according to the United States Census (2018). Of that, 85.1% of the population have a high school diploma, and only 22.3% have a bachelor’s degree, with 58.8% active in the labor force (United States Census, 2018). An overwhelmingly 22.9% of the population are living below the poverty level (United States Census, 2018). The average benefit amount per household is \$246.



*Figure 3.* Hunger in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States.

These statistics suggest clients are receiving an average of about \$4 per day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This amount is unrealistic towards quality food items. Although the maximum monthly allowance is \$194 per month per person, the average state recipient gets about \$122 according to the United States Department of Agriculture (2016). Program restrictions and benefit reductions have reduced the participation of individuals in the Food Assistance Program. However, 1 in 4 people in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States is still experiencing food shortages. In 2016, the number of state program recipients dropped 23 %. This decrease in participation reduced the state's cost 31 %, from \$261 million to \$181 million, but did not reduce food insecurity in the state.

Similar studies in the past have also documented hunger in the United States. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture documented 1 in 6 Americans across the nation are facing food insecurity. The families in the study also experienced financial hardships and difficulties with employment. In the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States, 1 in 4 people is experiencing food insecurities. According to this study, food insecurities and food shortages are playing a detrimental role in recipients finding employment, reducing stress, health, and their overall ability to thrive in society.

### **Summary**

The data results represented the 11 program participants and three program administrators interviewed, and the third data source correlated with the primary research question and secondary questions. All the data shows the participants experienced food shortages, health risks, added stress and humiliation, and participation in additional food sources. The program participants continue to participate in the food programs until they earn more money or do not qualify anymore. The major themes emerged as a result of the responses of the participants: breakfast and lunch meals are skipped for families not participating in the School Breakfast, Lunch and Summer Food Programs, monthly Food Assistance Program benefits are not adequate for each family size, families ran out of food on average 4 days a month, additional food resources were sought on average twice a month, food costs and shortages caused families anxiety, depression, and shame, program changes continue to hinder participating families, and the Food Assistance Program benefit formula should be reevaluated.

This chapter discussed how all ethical concerns during the research procedures were addressed, describing how the data collection and data analysis components were completed, providing evidence of trustworthiness during the research study process, and presenting the results of my research study based on the responses of the participants and concluded with a summary of the results. Chapter 5 will include an analysis and interpretation of the research findings. Chapter 5 will present a more detailed analysis of the results and interpret the findings based on the theoretical framework of my research and the literature review as described in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 5 will also include recommendations for future research, providing a framework for public policy practitioners and any implications for social change because of my research study.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In examining the role of distribution mechanisms of the federal Food Assistance Program, this study was intended to fill a gap in the literature on the federal Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and its ability to meet the food needs of families with limited income and limited access to additional food sources living under the poverty level. Using PFT as a theoretical frame, this study was intended to address the principal question: How does policy feedback theory help explain the role of distribution mechanisms in helping the Food Assistance Program meet the needs of individuals who have little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources below the poverty level in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States by learning about the experiences of federal Food Assistance Program recipients?

The effectiveness of the distribution mechanisms in helping these individuals meet their food needs was evaluated through a case study of the Food Assistance Program in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. Through an examination of how ideas, actors, and networks support the Food Assistance Program in its capacity to meet the food needs of individuals with little to no income and limited access to alternative food sources, I sought to broaden understanding of the central role that distribution mechanisms play in the ability of the federal Food Assistance Program to address the hunger crisis in the selected county. This case study was conducted in a county in the Great Lakes region of the United States,

given its large population of families living below the poverty level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), 25.1% of families are below the poverty level in the selected county compared to 14.8% overall in the United States. Data for this study was collected with the permission of the county DHHS through interviews with 11 program participants and three program administrators.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Six themes emerged from the interviews: participating in the school breakfast and lunch programs; monthly food assistance program benefits are not enough; monthly food shortages, seeking additional food resources monthly; added anxiety, depression, and shame; and food program benefit formula should be reevaluated. This first theme is focused on the participation of the school breakfast and lunch programs. The participants' related their participation of this program to secure meals and conserve for other meals while the children attend school. Supplying breakfast, lunch, and dinner without the participation of the School Breakfast and Lunch program was challenging for families with limited or no income and access to other resources. Table 3 illustrates how this theme emerged through selective coding.

Table 3

*Emergent Theme of Breakfast and Lunch Programs Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Securing meals (Theme: Breakfast and lunch programs)
1	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
2	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
3	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
4	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
5	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
6	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
7	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
8	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
9	Previous participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
10	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs
11	Current participation in school breakfast and lunch programs

The 11 participants expressed frustration with the Food Assistance Program benefit amounts (distribution mechanisms) that seemed to threaten the quality of life and their ability to function in society. These participants noted that the benefits were not enough alone. They consistently found themselves short on food items, scrambling to coordinate daily meals, and even skipping meals. The food costs and inflation consumed the benefits quickly and pushed the participants to seek additional resources. This burden was an added expense and invited additional strains to the food insecurity.

Additionally, some of the participants who were in-between jobs found it hard to participate in the job search when they were food insecure and sought additional food items to get through the month. The participants who worked or had some income found it a burden to seek additional food resources, which took time away from their work or development and introduced added expenses for the logistics and time involved to seek additional food resources. The participants often had to sacrifice meat items to maximize

their benefits but still found themselves food insecure. The benefit amount forced all participants to seek cheaper food items, creating health risks and concerns such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Emergent Theme of Insufficient Food Benefits Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Not enough benefits (Theme: Insufficient food benefits)
1	It doesn't account for all food items.
2	If you buy meat items, it's not enough.
3	The benefits are barely enough.
4	We never have enough to get through the month.
5	We always have to rely on additional resources
6	We always need more.
7	Not enough!
8	It's not enough.
9	Food costs are too high; it runs out fast.
10	During the summer, never enough.
11	We can't buy all the food items we need.

The next theme is related to the previous theme, which involves the number of days the participants ran out of food in a monthly period. All the participants recounted how they suffered every time they ran out of food each month. The monthly food shortage ranged from 1 to 10 days a month, one day being the minimum and ten days being the maximum monthly food shortages. In other words, all the participants experienced a 5-day medium of food shortages each month. Through manual coding, the theme emerged from the fact that the participants experienced some food shortage (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Emergent Theme of Monthly Food Shortages Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Days without food monthly (Theme: Monthly food shortages)
1	4-5 days
2	Not often, but we skip meals
3	10 days
4	10-15 days
5	7 days
6	10-15 days
7	7 days
8	3-5 days
9	Not often, but we skip meals
10	4 days
11	3-4 days

The next theme emerged from the responses on how often participants sought additional food resources. When seven of the participants ran out food, they pursued additional resources. These resources included food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. Although the other four participants did not visit food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters, they would have if they did not have barriers such as shame, transportation, and religious food restrictions. The seven participants found themselves visiting food pantries at least once a month. Some would visit twice a month, reaching their monthly limit. Food shortages would cause them to seek help at soup kitchens and shelters. Manual coding helped identify themes that related to participants seeking additional food resources (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Emergent Theme of Additional Food Resources Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Food pantries/soup kitchens (Theme: additional food resources)
1	I would visit food pantries if I had transportation.
3	We visit food pantries at least once a month.
4	Food pantries, twice a week.
5	We visit the church twice a month for additional food.
6	We visit food pantries twice a month.
7	I don't know where they are
8	We visit food pantries and soup kitchens on holidays.
9	We visit food pantries twice a month.
10	Food pantries and soup kitchens occasionally.
11	Food pantries twice a month.

The next theme emerged from multiple interview questions. The 11 participants experienced some form of stress and anxiety participating in the Food Assistance Program. These mental burdens stemmed from food shortages to seeking additional food resources. Other mentions included reductions and restrictions to the program. The participants expressed the shame and humiliation that came with the participation in the program. There is already a stigma that affects the program recipients but seeking additional food to supplement food shortages brings additional shame and embarrassment. A few of the participants would rather skip meals than deal with the additional shame. The participants who were married also expressed marital problems and strains from food insecurity. Some even found themselves depressed from all the added struggles involved with the food shortages, stigma, and bureaucracy of the program. Manual coding assisted in the development of this theme (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Emergent Theme of Added Anxiety, Stress, and Shame Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Ashamed and stressed (Theme: Added anxiety, stress, and shame)
1	I stress about not having enough food often.
3	I can't sleep from the worry and stress about food.
5	I get anxiety when we run out of food.
6	Although I'm grateful, they make me feel like I'm a beggar.
8	Frustration and anxiety every time we run out.
9	We get weak and frustrated when we have to seek additional food.
10	Anger and shame!

The final theme was identified by program participants and program administrators. All 14 participants expressed their frustration with the program formula that should be re-evaluated and updated. According to the program administrators, the program policy is outdated and is not practical with economic challenges that exist for some program recipients. Outdated policy and distribution mechanisms pose a challenge for those participants' in-between jobs, those who have exhausted unemployment benefits, or those who do not qualify for disability payments. This includes the cost of items and inflation. The participants have only experienced food benefit reduction from the program changes and restrictions that hinder their ability to thrive in society. The program may delay food insecurity, but it does not prevent it. The program can only reduce food insecurity when some income is available and other food resources. This may have worked for some of the recipients but not all of them. Manual coding assisted in the development of this theme (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Emergent Theme of Benefit Formula Reevaluation Based on Manual Coding*

Participant	Benefit program outdated (Theme: Benefit formula reevaluation)
1	The program is not enough! They need to take another look.
2	They don't consider high food costs.
3	The benefits are too little.
5	The benefits are insufficient.
6	The program should be reevaluated.
7	They need to increase the benefits and reduce the paperwork.
9	The cheap food items are not working for my family.
10	The program is not effective without other resources.
11	It's not working. They need to fix it.

The findings confirm with the literature that the Food Assistance Program reduces some food insecurity when there are some income and availability to additional food resources. For example, Nicholas-Casebolt and Morris (2002) studied the growing concern toward the Food Assistance Program's ability to supply basic nourishment for working-class families. Other studies were focused on the dietary patterns of low-income families on the Food Assistance Program. However, the findings also disconfirm the program's ability to prevent food shortage. For example, Huffman and Jensen (2008) examined the Food Assistance Program's ability to meet basic food needs and increase food security and found it was effective with other resources. However, the data in this study show participants still had food shortages while maximizing other food resources. The findings also extend knowledge of the barriers and hardships created by the Food Assistance Program when clients are forced to seek additional food resources. These barriers include no income, transportation, added expenses, and negative mental effects.



In the context of the theoretical framework of the study, my findings show that the distribution mechanisms are negatively affecting the participants. My findings show that limiting or reducing the distribution mechanism benefits will continue to increase food shortages forcing participants to seek additional food resources. Such burdens have introduced added expenses, anxiety, and hardship, unable to prevent food shortages. Some clients had limited or no income, which made it difficult to rely on other food resources. Other participants found it frustrating and stressful when the other food resources were also limited. Analyzing the ideas, actors, networks of the theoretical framework against my findings, there are funding, political, and policy concerns involved with the program.

### **Ideas**

According to the theory, ideas are focused on the aim or purpose of the program. The findings illustrated that the program did prevent some food insecurity for families who had some income and access to other resources. Although this is consistent with the literature review, the program did not completely prevent food shortages. Furthermore, it was ineffective in preventing food insecurity and food shortages for families with no income, as they experienced the most food shortages. This idea plays an important role in the Food Assistance Program because it was designed originally to prevent hunger in the United States. Although the idea of the program was initially to prevent hunger in the United States, over time and through political pressure, the program was changed to supplement the food needs of the working class. This shift created a gap for limited income food recipients relying on the program. Interpreting the data in this study, the idea

in the theoretical framework takes a closer look at limited income food recipients and ensure they are not falling through the cracks. The participants in this study experienced more food shortages when income was not available, along with other hardships. Food shortages and hunger introduced added stress, anxiety, and depression, affecting the overall ability to function and contribute to society. The idea of the Food Assistance Program is no longer relevant to all citizens and needs to be reevaluated.

### **Actors**

According to the theory, the actors involved are the policymakers forced to make drastic policy changes and cuts to the food programs. The findings illustrated the current distribution mechanisms are ineffective in preventing food insecurity and food shortages. The actors are geared toward the participants in the process (or actions) in the program or policy. The actors play an important role in the program; any changes to the program can have a catastrophic effect for some families but not others. Although some changes may have intended to get people to work, such changes did guarantee people jobs and created additional barriers for families.

Restricting or reducing the program to alleviate political pressure does not solve the hunger problem in the United States. In fact, according to the findings of this study, it has not prevented food insecurity or food shortages for families relying on the program. The findings in this study represent a need for the actors to change a “locked in” policy to fill the gap of little to no income families to reduce food insecurity and food shortages. The policymakers have a moral responsibility to all people that may or may not thrive in

society. Policymakers should start with the initial *idea* of the program and build from there.

### **Networks**

According to the theory, *networks* are geared toward the groups or systems of the program or policy. The *networks* play an important role due to their association to the program, consistent with the literature. This role in the program process is vital because it created incentives for special interest groups and social networks to protect public programs or interests. In this study, we focus on the private and public food networks affected or correlated with the Food Assistance Program. The findings in this were not consistent with the literature review and illustrated a pointless need for incentives for some networks while reducing or restricting funding a specific policy or program such as the Food Assistance Program. Adding a “middleman” or an added step in the process created additional barriers such as hardships, expenses, and added stress for families, while still experiencing food insecurity and food shortages.

Once the *Ideas* and *Actors* are looked at closer, the networks may or may not be necessary any further. The *networks* involved, according to the theoretical framework, include the private and public food programs designed to address the hunger epidemic in the United States. According to the findings in this study, program participants that had some income and sought additional food resources experienced less food insecurity but still had some food shortages. These participants were grateful to experience less food insecurity but still experienced added stress, additional expenses, and other hardships, while seeking additional resources. The participants with no income experienced more

food insecurity and added barriers, such as transportation, shame, and limit restrictions while seeking additional food resources. Funding other public and private food networks may not have been the answer to the program or the public, in addressing hunger.

The theoretical framework under which the research was conducted indicated that it was important for public policy administrators to understand the phenomenon of hunger and the Food Assistance Program in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States paradigm and through the prism of the newest economic challenges and changes. The findings in this study can play an important role in helping policymakers understand the effects of the Food Assistance Program. After the passage of the Food Stamp Act of 1964 by the federal government, the majority of public policy administrators assumed hunger in America would be resolved. However, hunger is still an epidemic in the United States and participation in the Food Assistance Program has increased. Administrators of public policy, as well as the broader American society, are realizing the current distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program are not effective with limited income, other food programs, and additional food resources. Program recipients still find themselves food insecure.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This qualitative study addressed the reliability and validity uniquely (see Creswell, 2009). The reliability and validity were evaluated in this study by me as the researcher checking the accuracy of the findings, using specific procedures such as triangulation, descriptions, and bias clarification. I validated an approach that was consistent with other researchers (see Gibbs, 2007). Data were collected through the form

of interviews from program participants, program administrators, and third party data sources.

In this research, I strived for consistency throughout the study with stringent documentation of the processes (see Creswell, 2009). Access to program participants was not as difficult as expected. However, access to more program administrators was limited, due to busy work schedules and heavy workloads. The data from all sources confirmed the emerging themes and was limited strictly to the research question and theoretical framework of the study.

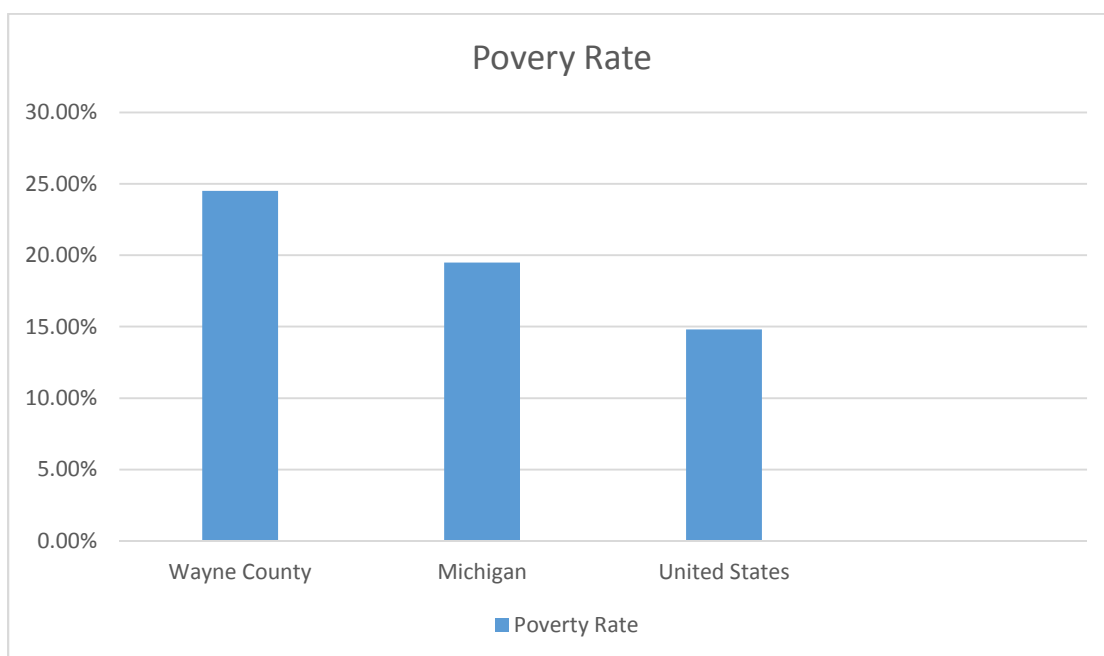
### **Summary of Key Findings**

Through an examination of the role of distribution mechanisms of the federal Food Assistance Program, in meeting the needs of families limited income and limited access to alternative food sources, this study was intended to answer the following question: How does policy feedback theory explain the role of distribution mechanisms in helping the Food Assistance Program to meet the needs of individuals who have limited income and limited access to alternative food sources below the poverty level in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States?

By examining the role of ideas, actors, and networks, the findings revealed the Food Assistance Program is ineffective for little to no income food recipients relying on the program. The participants in this study experienced more food shortages when income was not available, along with other hardships.

Food shortages and hunger bring on added stress, anxiety, and depression, affecting the overall ability to function and contribute to society. For example, the findings revealed that the role of *ideas* was critical, given the importance of the purpose of the program; to prevent hunger. The idea of the Food Assistance Program is no longer relevant to all citizens and needs to be re-evaluated. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the role of the *actors* was critical, given the importance of their role in the process. Political pressures and landscapes have negatively impacted the program and extended the burden to families experiencing food insecurity and food shortages.

The policymakers can change a “locked in” policy to fill the needs of limited income families to reduce food insecurity and food shortages. The policymakers have a moral responsibility to all people that may or may not thrive in society. Moreover, the role of *networks* involved in the process hinders the program distribution mechanisms because it affects program funding and creates additional barriers for clients forced to seek additional food resources. Removing the *networks* can allow families to rely solely on the distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program, reducing barriers, added stress and allowing families to maximize benefits. This could be known as a “one-stop shop” reducing food shortages and increasing food security in the United States.



*Figure 4.* Poverty rate comparison.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The vast amount of hunger around the world and food insecurity in local communities has challenged researchers. This study focused on the effects of distribution mechanisms of Federal Food Assistance Program, in meeting the needs of families with limited income and limited access to alternative food sources, as personally experienced by the selected participants. In the county selected, 25.1% of families are living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The data from this study have introduced new concerns about the health risks and added burdens associated with the Food Assistance Program. As families across the state continue to live under the poverty level and experience food insecurity, it is important to conduct further studies that will show the health effects of the Food Assistance Program in the United States. Decreased benefit amounts and restrictions have an impact on the quality of food items purchased to

reduce food insecurity for families living under the poverty level, and it is recommended that public policy leaders, government officials, and educators further study these effects on the people they are charged to serve.

It is also recommended that researchers study the experiences of families living under the poverty limit and their ability to thrive in society, as their numbers increase around the nation; as well as the phenomenon of hunger that continues to challenge researchers. Further research is needed to provide evidence on how work employment restrictions for the Food Assistance Program are helping to reduce hunger and increase food insecurity. All the participants and administrators agreed it should be a priority for policymakers to re-evaluate the program to suit all families and take into consideration the cost of food and inflation.

According to the findings of this study, program distribution mechanisms must be adjusted to address the challenges and barriers clients face from the program; it could also reduce food insecurity. For instance, why have multiple programs and resources to seek at different times, when one program can be a “one-stop shop.” Funding multiple programs and resources while reducing or restriction the distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program did not increase food security or reduce food shortages. Families without income experienced more food shortages each month. Participants that sought additional resources believed it was helpful but did not prevent food shortages. These hardships caused participants to experience added stress, shame, expenses, and depression, while not preventing food shortages. Funding the Food Assistance Program



sufficiently alone could reduce the burden, stress, and hardship involved with running out of food. Ultimately, reducing food insecurity.

My research introduced an ample amount of knowledge. At the start of the research, my goal was to have families on the Food Assistance Program and administrators share their experiences with food insecurity. However, while the recipients were grateful for the food assistance provided by the federal government, many expressed concerns about continued food shortages, program benefit reductions, and program restrictions. My research provided an in-depth view of the Food Assistance Program's distribution mechanisms and its ability to reduce food shortages and hunger facing future generations in different communities across the state, living below the federal poverty level. The question that resonated with me is "why do I have to participate in multiple different food programs and visit multiple food pantries to prevent running out of food each month?" The answer to this question will assist policy makers (for a closer look at the *ideas*, *actors*, and *networks*) in preventing further food shortages and reducing food insecurity in the United States.

My passion to reduce hunger in the United States is the driving force for my research. No human being should go hungry in the United States. There are so many other challenges families have to face in the United States, hunger should not be one of them. Hunger can affect a family's ability to participate and thrive in society. My research represents my commitment to the phenomenon of hunger in the United States. My research is also intended to affect social change, assisting policymakers and

government officials to re-evaluate policies that may help some families but hinder others in the United States.

### **Social Implications and Recommendations for Future Public Policy Initiatives**

My research focused on the effectiveness of the Food Assistance Program towards food insecurity in the United States. Research has shown the Food Assistance Program reduces some food insecurity, only with some income and additional food resources. Participants and administrators expressed concern with the distribution mechanisms for the program and found them to be ineffective. Although both public and private food programs combined are needed to meet daily nutritional values (Daponte et al., 2004), the participants in this study found it to be a burden to participate in multiple programs and seek additional food resources each month; others saw it as a barrier and had to skip meals. Furthermore, families with no income experienced more food shortages each month.

This study on the distribution mechanisms of the Food Assistance Program in a county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States is based on historical and current data of food insecurity and hunger in the United States: (a) 14.8% of the population in the United States are living below the poverty level, and (b) 25.1% of the population are living below the poverty level in the selected county. The maps below are an illustration of poverty in the United States and the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States. These facts have implications for public policymakers and government officials.

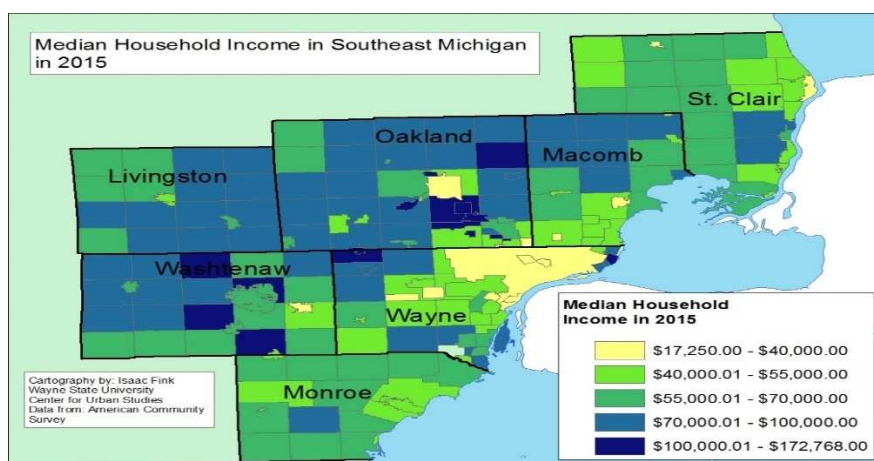


Figure 5. 2015 U.S. census income median for Michigan.

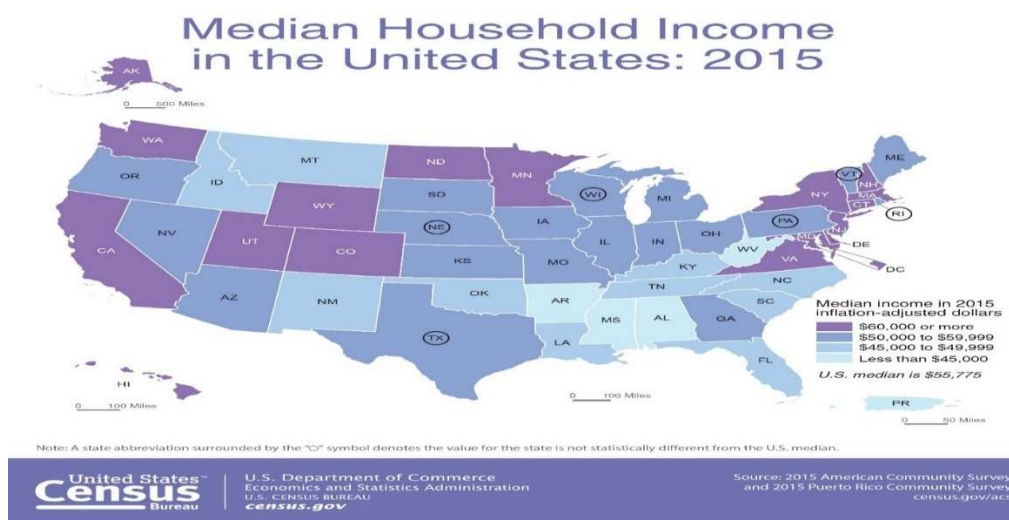


Figure 6. 2015 U.S. census income median.

### Conclusion

My research has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the Food Assistance Program’s distribution mechanisms for families with limited income and limited access to additional resources. Furthermore, the program restrictions, barriers, and added stresses are detrimental to families and may have long-lasting effects. The benefit

formula is outdated and does not take into consideration the effects of inflation and rising food costs. Families with some income still experienced food shortages and sought additional food resources to reduce food insecurity. Families with no income experienced more food shortages and barriers seeking additional resources.

A program evaluation of the distribution mechanisms while re-evaluating the ideas, actors, and networks involved in the process according to the theoretical framework in this study can help adjust the benefit formula and reduce the stress and barriers in seeking additional food resources. Funding the Food Assistance Program sufficiently verses partially funding multiple food programs would be more efficient for families living under the poverty limit across the nation. Seeking additional food resources throughout the month is an added burden and stressful for families. Such hardships and barriers can be avoided if the Food Assistance Program was re-evaluated accordingly, adjusting the distribution mechanisms benefit formula, removing work restrictions, and the added barriers. Multiple program funding may exceed the cost of an adequate food benefit increase of the benefit formula for the Food Assistance Program recipients.

These program changes can increase food security and reduce the added expenses, stress, and barriers involved in the process that recipients are facing each day, living under the poverty level in the county with greater than expected levels of poverty in the Great Lakes region of the United States and across the nation. This can help families focus on finding employment, earning more income, improved health, reducing stress, and their overall ability to function better in society. Policymakers can change the views

of public opinion, by removing the stigma attached to the public food programs. There should be no shame in addressing food shortages in the United States. Compassion and understanding from policymakers can help families living under the poverty level thrive in the United States until they get back on their feet and give back to the system. This can allow families to perform more civic duties and volunteer more of their time to the communities they live in, initiating mass social change in the United States and leading the way to prevent the phenomenon of hunger around the world.

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## Appendix A: Initial Contact Interview

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewer:

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewee:

\_\_\_\_\_

Interview Number:

1. Are you participating in the Food Assistance Program?
2. What is your family size?
3. Do you have any income?

## Appendix B: Final Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_

Interview Number:

1. Does your family participate in the School Breakfast and/or Lunch Program? If so, why?
2. How often do you run out of food on a monthly basis? What hardships does this cause?
3. How often do you visit food pantries for additional food? If so, how helpful is this resource?
4. How often do you visit soup kitchens for additional meals? If so, how helpful is this resource?
5. Do you believe the Food Assistance Program should be re-evaluated? Why or why not?

## Appendix C: Administrator Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_

Interview Number:

1. How many years have you administered the Food Assistance Program?
2. How many times has the program changed over the years? Have the changes helped or hindered the clients? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe the program has been effective over the years? Why or why not?
4. Does the program provide enough food for families without income? Why or why not??
5. Do you believe the benefit formula should be re-evaluated? Why or why not??



## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs' Distribution Mechanisms: A Policy  
Feedback Theory Approach  
Walden University**

You are invited to participate in a research study of the Food Assistance Program Distribution Mechanisms. You were selected as a participant because of your knowledge and experience related to the topic. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before acting on this invitation to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Ahmad Sabbagh, Doctoral Candidate at Walden University.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand your experience as a participant of the Food Assistance Program in your county.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a short survey for approximately ten minutes.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Walden University or the Department of Health and Human Services. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw at any time later without affecting those relationships.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. The potential benefit of participating in this study may come in the form of providing more food benefits for Food Assistance participants.

In the event, you experience stress or anxiety during your participation in the study you may terminate your participation at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful.

**Compensation:**

There is no form of compensation for participation.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report of this study that might be published, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. Interviews will be collected for purposes of describing your experience.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Ahmad Sabbagh. The researcher's advisor is Dr. Gabriel Telleria. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Ahmad Sabbagh at [REDACTED]@waldenu.edu or [REDACTED]@waldenu.edu. The Research Participant Advocate at Walden University is [REDACTED]; you may contact her at [REDACTED]waldenu.edu if you have questions about your participation in this study.

You will receive a copy of this form from the researcher.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Name of Participant

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Signature

---

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

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