



DISABILITY AND SOCIAL WELFARE PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE LENS OF FOOD INSECURITY

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Households with disability represent a special case of need when it comes to addressing disparities in well-being, with the presence of food insecurity acting as a bellwether for this unmet need at the household-level. Participation in social welfare programs has been shown to alleviate or even keep households out of food insecurity. Yet little is known about how households with disability select into the multitude of programs available across the social welfare system and even less on how this collective participation differs by food security status.

An idiosyncratic relationship: disability, program participation, and food insecurity

Households with disability experience disparities in well-being compared to those without disability. In trying to overcome this gap in well-being, households with disability often face the dual challenge of a higher level of resources needed to meet an adequate standard of living and higher administrative burden when accessing the array of social welfare programs that could help meet this greater need. Food insecurity is a strong indicator of a gap in well-being, highlighting that a significant degree of need is not being met at the household level. Participation in social welfare programs has been found to reduce food insecurity. However, complicating the understanding of how program participation can address gaps in well-being specifically for households with disability are two long-standing and competing factors within the social welfare system: the tendency for households with greater need to participate at higher rates in social welfare programs and the significant barriers associated with the application and on-going enrollment processes inherent to participation in social welfare programs.

This study of low-income households with young children examines the relationship between disability and participation in social welfare programs, identifying how this relationship varies by level of need in the household, as operationalized by food insecurity. Drawing upon the unique set of disability, social welfare participation, and food insecurity variables available in the redesigned Survey of Income and Program Participation (2013-2019), this paper first estimates individual and collective participation rates in seventeen programs for households with and without members self-reporting a disability, testing for significant differences across the two groups. Next, selection models estimate the probability of program participation separately for households with and without disability to determine whether there are differences by disability status in the factors theorized to predict participation. Finally, participation rates are stratified by the degree of food insecurity at the household level (i.e., very low food security, low food security, marginal food security, high food security) to determine whether differences in participation by disability status vary by the level of need present in the household.



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Households with disability participate more in welfare programs...

Households with any disability make up a larger share of participation in the social welfare system than those with no disability present. Households with any disability participate in 4.05 programs on average, compared 2.97 programs for households with no disability. While 60 percent of households with no disability participate in three or more programs, only 19 percent participate in five or more. In contrast, 79 percent of households with any disability participate in at least three programs and over 40 participate in five or more programs. Of individual program participation, Medicaid has the highest rate of participation for both households with any disability (87.58 percent) and for those with no disability (75.98 percent). Differences in participation rates across disability status are largest for SNAP (19.68 percentage points). Participation rates in EITC and subsidized child care are statistically equivalent across disability status. Surprisingly, there are only a few instances where the factors predicting selection into program participation vary notably across disability status, such as for age, race/ethnicity, and number of children in the household. However, these differences tend to be present only for programs whose eligibility is always or often directly related to disability (i.e., SSDI, SSI, Medicare, and Medicaid). Thus, the traditional approach to modeling program participation may be inadequate for explaining differences in social welfare program participation across disability status.

...but may under participate relative to the level of food insecurity in household

Differences in program participation rates across disability status are smaller and less significant in the presence of greater household need. When looking at multiple program participation rates, differences between households with any disability and with no disability are similar or even smaller when households experience high food security than when they experience low or very very low food security. A similar pattern exists when looking at individual program participation. For households with very low food security, participation rates for ten of the seventeen social welfare programs in households with a disability are lower than or indistinguishable from rates for households without disability. This is compared to households with high food security, where participation rates for only three programs are equivalent across disability status. With food security status as an indicator of the level of need present in a household, these findings suggest that when the level of need is highest (i.e., the presence of very low food security), there are larger gaps in social welfare program participation between households with and without disability than when the level of need is lowest (i.e., the presence of high food security).

Implications

- Relative to their level of need, households with disability under participate in both the quantity and the kinds of social welfare programs compared to their counterparts without disability or with higher food security.
- This finding suggests a potential presence of greater barriers for high-need households with disability when trying to access certain individual or multiple programs within the social welfare system.
- Given that there is a lack of variation across disability status in the traditional program selection factors used to predict program participation, more research is needed to theorize and determine why participation gaps persist across disability status.

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