

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

Our primary research question is who among TANF leavers is choosing not to participate in the FSP when eligible to do so. Our goal is to explore how individual, family, and neighborhood characteristics affect whether an eligible household will use benefits. Our main hypothesis is that nonparticipation is not random, but is instead focused among families and neighborhoods with selected characteristics.

Accordingly, we first hypothesize that various measures of need, such as socioeconomic measures of hardship, are likely to increase take-up rates among the eligible. In addition, we identify one simple individual measure of the personal cost of using food stamps—the distance a person must travel from his or her home to the Illinois DHS office that administers the program. We hypothesize that those who live far from a DHS office are likely to have lower take-up rates than those who live closer. The mental health status and attitudes toward welfare among potential participants are also likely to affect take-up decisions. Those who are more depressed or who do not believe in the rights of individuals to welfare may be less likely to participate.

The communities in which we live affect our opportunities and choices, often through the network of contacts they provide. We therefore hypothesize that local economic and demographic factors, such as level of neighborhood poverty or unemployment, may influence the participation decision. There are two reasons why the likelihood of a household's participation may be higher in areas of high poverty, high unemployment, or high food stamp participation. First, the stigma associated with participation in means-tested programs may be lower, making individual household participation more likely. Second, personal contacts who have had experience with the welfare system may share knowledge of the program. As a result, we hypothesize a positive relationship between community levels of deprivation and food stamp take-up rates. For similar reasons, take-up rates may also likely depend on the DHS operation. Practices and efficiencies, including outreach and communication about the FSP, can differ across offices, and we hypothesize that these differences may affect participation rates.