

# Understanding the Impact of the Fresh Start Program in the Paso del Norte Region

Kelly Center for Hunger Relief

The Hunt Institute for Global  
Competitiveness

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**KELLY** CENTER FOR  
HUNGER RELIEF

**Fresh Start**  
at Kelly Center for Hunger Relief

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# Introduction

Many individuals and families in the U.S. experience food insecurity, meaning they lack reliable access to affordable and nutritious foods. The determinants of food insecurity and its impact on individual outcomes have been extensively studied within the academic literature (see Gundersen et al., 2011; Drewnowski, 2022; Davis et al., 2024, among others). Works in this area have highlighted the fact that food insecurity is often a symptom of many underlying economic and socio-economic problems. As such, attempts to reduce food insecurity by simply providing individuals with food will help in the short run but may have a limited impact in the long run.

The Kelly Center for Hunger Relief (Kelly Center) is focused on alleviating food insecurity in the Paso del Norte region. While providing emergency food through the operation of a food pantry is core to the Kelly Center mission, they also recognize that the root causes of food insecurity go deeper than this. To this end, the Kelly Center offers the Fresh Start program, which focuses on providing “More Than Food” to individuals experiencing food insecurity. Along with additional food choices, the Fresh Start program connects participants with a case manager to identify areas needing development, such as stable housing and employment, which are important in achieving self-sufficiency.

In this report, the Hunt Institute for Global Competitiveness (Hunt Institute) at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) considers the impact of the Fresh Start program on participants between August 2020 and October 2024. The Kelly Center provided all data used in this report. On average, participants experience improvements in many areas during the program, with full-time employment rising and unemployment falling. Self-reported measures of food insecurity have also been found to improve throughout the duration of the program. While these benefits are encouraging, the data also shows a high degree of attrition from the program, with many participants stopping out after the initial interview session. Key characteristics that differ between participants who complete the program and those who do not are also highlighted to provide some insights into the populations most at risk of attrition from the program. The report closes with suggestions regarding future work.

# Summary Statistics

The Kelly Center provided data on Fresh Start participants from August 2020 through October 2024. In total, 221 participants were included. Table 1 provides a summary of participant characteristics. The average age of participants was 48 years; they were also predominantly female (59.28%) and Hispanic (86.88%). The largest relationship category among participants was single (44.34%), and the majority reported having no children at home (57.92%). Of those who reported having children, the average number was 2.53.

Table 2 provides additional summary statistics, focusing on education, employment, and other stability-related categories. Over 45% of participants report they do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, while the proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher was 9.5%. A significant proportion of participants report that their income is insufficient to meet their basic needs (48.64%), and most participants report being unemployed (70.59%). Finally, in terms of housing, a majority report access to permanent housing (76.47%), but there are still many participants experiencing homelessness (12.67%) or who are living in transitional housing (9.50%).

These summary statistics demonstrate some of the economic hardships that program participants face. The following section considers how program participation impacts many of these important characteristics, such as employment, homelessness, and individuals' responses to self-reflection questions that focus on food insecurity.

**Table 1: Summary Statistics for All Program Participants**

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Total Participants</b>                           | <b>221</b> |
| Average Age   | 48.27      |
| Female (%)  | 59.28      |
| Male (%)  | 24.43      |
| Hispanic (%)  | 86.88      |
| White (%)   | 8.14       |
| Black (%)   | 1.36       |
| Other Race/Ethnicity (%)                            | 3.62       |
| Single (%)  | 44.34      |
| Married (%)   | 24.24      |
| Other Relationship Status (%)                       | 31.42      |
| Have Children (%)                                   | 42.08      |
| Without Children (%)                                | 57.92      |
| Average Number of Children (of those with Children) | 2.53       |
| 4+ in Household (%)                                 | 36.20      |
| All data is reported from the first session         |            |

**Table 2: Summary Statistics for All Program Participants Continued**

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| No High School Diploma or Equivalent (%)                  | 45.70 |
| High School Diploma or Equivalent (%)                     | 17.19 |
| Some College or Vocational Training (%)                   | 15.84 |
| Completed Associates Degree or Vocational Certificate (%) | 11.31 |
| Completed Bachelors Degree or Higher (%)                  | 9.50  |
| Income Does Not Meet Basic Needs (%)                      | 48.64 |
| Income Meets Basic Needs (%)                              | 51.36 |
| Employed Full-time (%)                                    | 9.95  |
| Employed Part-time (%)                                    | 19.46 |
| Unemployed(%)   | 70.59 |
| Homeless (%)  | 12.67 |
| Transitional Housing (%)                                  | 9.50  |
| Permanent Housing (%)                                     | 76.47 |
| All data is reported from the first session               |       |

## Benefits of the Program

The Fresh Start program includes three interview sessions that take place over a period of nine months. The first interview session is conducted when an individual joins the Fresh Start program. Responses recorded in the first interview session serve as a baseline that can be compared with the responses reported in interview session 3, at the end of the program. Changes in average responses between interview session 1 and interview session 3 can be taken as suggestive evidence of program impact.<sup>1</sup>

While the summary statistics presented above included data from 221 participants, the results presented in this section are from a subset of 88 participants who completed all three interview sessions. Table 3 shows that the percentage of participants reporting homelessness falls from 9.09% in session 1 to 3.41% in session 3. There is also a sizable increase in the proportion reporting access to permanent housing, rising from 84.09% to 94.32%. In terms of education, there are modest gains in the proportion of participants reporting a high school diploma or equivalent (17.05% vs 18.18%) or an associates degree or technical certificate (9.09% vs 12.50%).<sup>2</sup> Participation in the program is associated with improved labor market outcomes, with full-time employment increasing from 6.82% to 15.91% and unemployment falling from 65.91% to 57.95%. A sizable increase in the proportion of participants reporting income sufficient to meet their basic needs is also observed (63.22% vs. 70.45%).

**Table 3: Change in Summary Statistics Between Session 1 and Session 3**

|  | Session 1 | Session 3 |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Homeless (%)   | 9.09      | 3.41      |
| Transitional Housing (%)   | 6.82      | 1.14      |
| Permanent Housing (%)  | 84.09     | 94.32     |
| High School Diploma or Equivalent (%)  | 17.05     | 18.18     |
| Associates Degree or Technical Certificate (%)   | 9.09      | 12.50     |
| Employed Full-time (%)   | 6.82      | 15.91     |
| Employed Part-time (%)   | 27.27     | 26.14     |
| Unemployed (%)   | 65.91     | 57.95     |
| Income Meets Basic Needs (%)   | 63.22     | 70.45     |
| All Family Covered by Medical Insurance (%)  | 52.27     | 57.95     |
| All Family Covered by Government Insurance (%)   | 20.45     | 23.86     |
| Data for this table are from the 88 program participants who attended all three sessions |           |           |

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this strategy of comparing responses from session 1 to session 3 does not have a true control group (e.g., a group who does not receive the Fresh Start program as a treatment). The final section of this report provides suggestions on how data for such a control group could be gathered.

<sup>2</sup> Large gains in education, especially in terms of bachelor's degree completion, should not be expected given the relatively short time (9 months) between session 1 and session 3.

**Table 3: Change in Summary Statistics Between Session 1 and Session 3 (%)**

|  | Session 1 | Session 3 |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Using SNAP (Food Stamps)   | 9.09      | 3.41      |
| Reporting “Often” to the following Questions   | 6.82      | 1.14      |
| We worried about whether food would run out before we got money to buy more              | 84.09     | 94.32     |
| The food that we bought just did not last and we did not have money to get more          | 17.05     | 18.18     |
| Associates Degree or Technical Certificate   | 9.09      | 12.50     |
| Employed Full-time   | 6.82      | 15.91     |
| Employed Part-time   | 27.27     | 26.14     |
| Unemployed   | 65.91     | 57.95     |
| Income Meets Basic Needs   | 63.22     | 70.45     |
| All Family Covered by Medical Insurance  | 52.27     | 57.95     |
| All Family Covered by Government Insurance   | 20.45     | 23.86     |
| Data for this table are from the 88 program participants who attended all three sessions |           |           |

Given that the Fresh Start program is intended to address the root causes of food insecurity, it is also important to consider how program participation directly influences food insecurity. Table 4 shows that while program participation has little impact on the take up of the supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP), there are sizeable improvements in many self-reported measures related to food insecurity. Specifically, the proportion of participants who report often worrying that food will run out before they have money to buy more falls from 38.64% in session 1 to 21.59% in session 3. A similar decline is observed for the proportion of participants who often cannot afford to eat balanced meals, falling from 30.68% in session 1 to 15.91% in session 3.



Inspection of Table 4 also reveals Improvements among individuals who report having children, with the proportion of respondents who often turn to low-cost food to feed their children due to financial concerns falling from 20.51% in session 1 to 12.82% in session 3. Furthermore, the proportion of participants who report their children often not having enough to eat due to financial reasons falls from 15.38% in session 1 to 5.13% in session 3.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Fresh Start program helps alleviate food insecurity while improving several underlying economic conditions for program participants.

**Table 4: Change in Food Insecurity Between Session 1 and Session 3 (%)**

|   | Session 1 | Session 3 |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| Using SNAP (Food Stamps)  | 50.00     | 47.73     |
| Percentage Reporting "Often" to the following Questions   |           |           |
| We worried about whether food would run out before we got money to buy more   | 38.64     | 21.59     |
| The food that we bought just did not last and we did not have money to get more   | 34.09     | 19.32     |
| We could not afford to eat balanced meals   | 30.68     | 15.91     |
| We relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed children because we were running out of money to buy food  | 20.51     | 12.82     |
| We could not feed children a balanced meal because we could not afford that   | 15.38     | 12.82     |
| Children were not eating enough because we just could not afford enough food  | 15.38     | 5.13      |
| Data for this table are from the 88 program participants who attended all three sessions. Data for the questions related to children are from a subsample of the 88 participants who report having children within their household. |           |           |



## Characteristics Associated with Attrition

While the results presented in the previous section suggest that the program may be successful in helping alleviate food insecurity, it is important to remember that these findings were produced using a subset of 88 participants who completed the entire program (all three sessions). This means that the remaining 133 participants did not complete all three sessions and likely did not benefit as much from the program. Attrition is typically high for programs such as these. However, it is still important to understand what, if any, characteristics may be associated with increased attrition from the program.

To better understand attrition, we compare two subsets of the program participants. The first subset includes the 88 participants considered in the previous section who completed all three interview sessions (all sessions). These participants are compared with the second subset that contains the 77 participants who only attend interview session 1 before stopping out of the program (only session 1).<sup>3</sup> Table 5 presents summary statistics for these two groups, all measured during interview session 1. Those who stop out after session 1 are, on average, younger (average age 43.70 vs. 52.82) and are more likely to be male (33.77% vs. 17.05%) than those who complete the program. There are also differences in terms of race and ethnicity, with a larger proportion of subjects who are white that stop out of the program (14.29% vs. 4.55%). Table 5 also shows minor differences in terms of children, but the proportion of participants with four or more individuals in their household differs significantly between the two groups (29.87% vs. 46.59%).

Table 6 presents additional differences between the two groups. Minor differences in education levels are observed between the two groups. However, the proportion of participants who report that their income is insufficient to meet their basic needs is significantly higher for those who stop out (54.55%) versus those who complete the program (36.78%). There are also significant differences between the two groups regarding labor market outcomes. Interestingly, the group who stops out has a larger proportion that is employed full-time (11.69% vs. 6.82%) but a much smaller proportion that is employed part-time (15.58% vs. 27.27%). As such, the proportion of unemployed is higher for the group who stop out (72.73% vs. 65.91%). Finally, the proportion of participants who report homelessness is substantially higher for those who stop out (18.18%) versus those who complete the program (9.09%). In comparison, the proportion of those who report access to permanent housing is substantially lower (66.23% vs. 84.09%).

The results presented in this section provide evidence of initial differences between individuals who complete the program and those who stop out after the initial interview session. While eliminating attrition from the program is impossible, understanding which characteristics are associated with a greater chance of attrition could be used for targeted interventions to help increase program completion.

<sup>3</sup> There are additional participants who attend both session 1 and 2 before stopping out of the program but for the purposes of this report, we focus on the more extreme case of attrition after attending just the initial interview session.



**Table 5: Differences Between Participants Who Continue vs. Stop Out**

|  | All Sessions | Only Session 1 |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| <b>Number of Participants</b>  | <b>88</b>    | <b>77</b>      |
| Average Age  | 52.82        | 43.70          |
| Male (%)   | 17.05        | 33.77          |
| Female (%)   | 63.64        | 49.35          |
| Hispanic (%)   | 90.91        | 80.52          |
| White (%)  | 4.55         | 14.29          |
| Black (%)  | 1.14         | 1.30           |
| Other (%)  | 3.40         | 3.89           |
| Have Children (%)  | 44.32        | 41.56          |
| Without Children (%)   | 55.68        | 58.44          |
| Average Number of Children (of those with Children)  | 2.38         | 2.66           |
| 4+ in Household (%)  | 46.59        | 29.87          |
| <p>"All Sessions" refers to program participants who attend all three sessions, while "Only Session 1" includes program participants who only attend the first session and then stop out. All information is from the initial session.</p> |              |                |

**Table 6: Differences Between Participants Who Continue vs. Stop Out Continued (%)**

|  | All Sessions | Only Session 1 |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| No High School Diploma or Equivalent   | 50.00        | 45.45          |
| High School Diploma or Equivalent  | 17.05        | 15.58          |
| Some College or Vocational Training  | 13.64        | 18.18          |
| Completed Associates Degree or Vocational Certificate  | 9.09         | 10.39          |
| Completed Bachelors Degree or Higher   | 9.09         | 10.39          |
| Income Does Not Meet Basic Needs   | 36.78        | 54.55          |
| Income Meets Basic Needs   | 63.22        | 45.45          |
| Employed Full-time   | 6.82         | 11.69          |
| Employed Part-time   | 27.27        | 15.58          |
| Unemployed   | 65.91        | 72.73          |
| Homeless   | 9.09         | 18.18          |
| Transitional Housing   | 6.82         | 11.69          |
| Permanent Housing  | 84.09        | 66.23          |
| <p>"All Sessions" refers to program participants who attend all three sessions, while "Only Session 1" includes program participants who only attend the first session and then stop out. All information is from the initial session.</p> |              |                |



## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Fresh Start program administered by the Kelly Center is found to help alleviate food insecurity for participants who complete the program. These participants experience improvements in self-reported measures of food insecurity between interview session 1 and interview session 3. Completion of the program is also associated with improvements in participants' underlying economic conditions, with gains observed in full-time employment and permanent housing, among others.

While these findings are encouraging, many participants stop out before completing the program. As such, they likely benefit less than those who complete the program. The group that only attends the first interview session is found to be younger, with a larger white-male population. These individuals also report less financial security and higher rates of unemployment and homelessness. Efforts to identify participants more at risk of attrition should be considered to improve program completion rates.

Additional work should be done to estimate the treatment effect of the Fresh Start program using true treatment and control groups. Given the data provided by the Kelly Center, this was not possible as all subjects in the sample were treated (e.g., they all received the Fresh Start program). The recruitment strategy for the Fresh Start program provides a natural control group, the program's waitlist. Individuals on the waitlist should be interviewed at the same frequency as those who are in the program. This would allow for multiple observations over time for the waitlist (control) and the Fresh Start participants (treatment). Differences between these groups over time would allow for better estimation of the underlying treatment effect of the program.

### References

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