

Introduction

In fall 2005, Hurricane Katrina—the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history—along with Hurricanes Rita and Wilma devastated areas along much of the Gulf Coast (see box, “Timeline of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes”). One effect of the hurricanes was a dramatic spike in both Food Stamp Program caseload and benefits issued (fig. 1). In November 2005, 29.7 million people received food stamps, the largest number ever to receive food stamps in a single month and about 4 million—or 15 percent—more than just 3 months earlier.¹

As of March 2006 (6 months after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast), 26.3 million people participated in the program, only 2 percent more than the pre-hurricane caseload of 25.8 million in August 2005. Most of the increase and subsequent decrease in caseload during fall and winter 2005-06 occurred in the Gulf Coast States that were hardest hit by the hurricanes. However, the impact of the hurricanes on food stamp caseload was felt in other States as well via their enrollment of evacuees from Gulf Coast States.

This report examines the effect of the hurricanes on Food Stamp Program caseload—in terms of both magnitude and duration—for selected States, groups of States (according to the degree to which they were affected by the hurricanes), and the Nation as a whole. The hurricanes’ effect on average food stamp benefits per person and average size of household is also examined. In addition, regression analyses were used to estimate what the Food Stamp Program caseload and benefits issued would have been without the disasters, which, in turn, were used to determine the total impact of the disasters at the national level.² The estimated effects of the hurricanes on food stamp benefits issued are compared with State administrative reports of benefits issued in response to the disasters.

¹The previous high was 28.0 million people in March 1994.

²This report focuses on the effect of the hurricanes on food stamp caseload and benefits issued. It does not look at the issue of increased administrative costs to the Food Stamp Program due to the hurricanes.

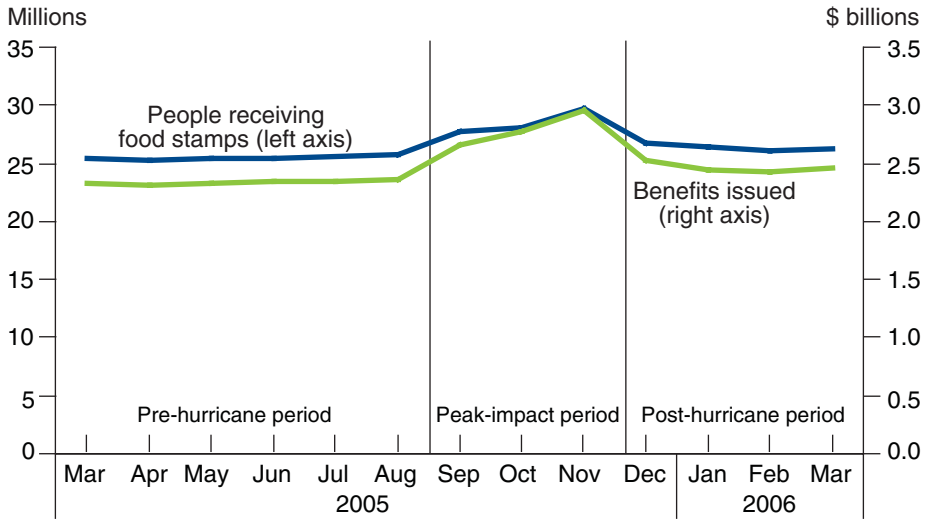
Timeline of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes

- August 29—Hurricane Katrina came ashore in Louisiana. Parts of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas were declared Federal disaster areas.
- September 24—Hurricane Rita made landfall near the Louisiana/Texas border. Parts of Louisiana were declared Federal disaster areas.
- October 24—Hurricane Wilma hit Florida. Parts of the State were declared Federal disaster areas.

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2006.

Figure 1

Food stamp caseloads and benefits issued, March 2005-March 2006



Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service National Data Bank.