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# Use of Food Pantries by Households With Children Rose During the Late 1990s

Laura Tiehen

Federal food assistance programs provided over \$34 billion in benefits to low-income households in 2001. At the same time, many households turned to emergency food providers in their community during times of need. A recent study of emergency food providers, funded by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), estimates almost 33,000 food pantries and over 5,000 emergency kitchens operate in the United States. These organizations provided an estimated 2.4 billion meals in 2000.

In 1996, Congress passed legislation that redesigned the cash welfare system. The legislation, commonly known as welfare reform, gave States more flexibility in the design of their welfare programs but imposed work requirements on cash welfare recipients and time limits on the receipt of Federal cash assistance. These changes may have affected participation in the Food Stamp Program. In addition, the 1996 welfare reform legislation restricted the eligibility of some groups to receive food stamps (see box).

Both cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads have declined since the mid-1990s. The number of people using food stamps decreased 37 percent between 1994 and 2000, from an average of 27.5 million people per month in 1994 to 17.2 million people per month in 2000 (table 1).

The number of Food Stamp Program participants increased slightly in 2001 to an average of 17.3 million per month. A strong economy certainly contributed to much of the decline, but many observers express concerns that some of those who have left the programs have not achieved self-sufficiency. These households may have instead come to depend on emergency food providers for assistance in meeting their food needs. Increased use of emergency food assistance in the midst of falling cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads may signal a shift to greater reliance on private versus public sources of assistance. Information on the population subgroups who use food pantries, and how that use has changed over time, can suggest ways to ensure that the Federal food assistance programs can provide a strong food safety net and work most effective-

ly with private food assistance efforts.

## Emergency Food Providers Have Distinct Roles in Providing Food for the Poor

Food pantries and emergency kitchens (often called soup kitchens) are referred to as the "retailers" of emergency food providers because they provide food directly to households and individuals. At food pantries, households receive bags of food that they use to prepare meals at home. Emergency kitchens provide prepared meals that are eaten at the site.

Most food pantries and emergency kitchens are connected to a "wholesaler," which is most commonly a food bank or a food rescue organization. Food banks obtain mostly nonperishable food in bulk from private and government sources. Food rescue organizations

**Table 1—Food Stamp Program Caseload Declined From 1994 to 2000**

Category	1994	2000
	<i>Millions</i>	
Individuals in all households	26.2	16.7
Individuals in single-parent families	13.3	8.5
Individuals in married-couple families	5.5	2.5
Children	13.5	8.5
Nonelderly adults	10.8	6.5
Elderly individuals	1.9	1.7
Noncitizens	1.8	.6

Note: The participant count in this table is based on estimates from the Food Stamp Program Quality Control Sample, which contains demographic information on participating households. The participant numbers cited in the text are from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service administrative records. The categories do not add up to the total because categories reported are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. Categories are displayed that most closely coincide with the types of households that are studied in this analysis. For a more complete description of the demographic characteristics of Food Stamp Program participants, see Cunyningham (2002).

Source: Cunyningham (2002)

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Food banks and other “wholesalers” obtain mostly nonperishable foods in bulk from private and government sources, including USDA’s Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The foods are then distributed to food pantries and emergency kitchens.

Credit: Ken Hammond, USDA.

seek out sources of perishable food, such as foodservice operations, food retailers and wholesalers, and farmers. For example, ProFish, the largest seafood distributor in the Washington, DC, area has donated fish and seafood to DC Central Kitchen, a food rescue organization. DC Central Kitchen uses the seafood and other rescued food to prepare meals for children and adults at social service agencies in the area.

Many food banks, food pantries, and emergency kitchens also receive and distribute USDA commodities through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which began in 1981. Originally, the foods distributed through TEFAP were surplus commodities that had been purchased by the Federal Government to support agricultural prices. Since 1988, USDA has been authorized to purchase food specifically for TEFAP and provide administrative support to the agencies that distribute the commodities. In addition, some community action agencies or local government agencies act as whole-

salers to receive and distribute USDA commodities, although food distribution is not their primary focus.

### Survey Asks Households About Their Use of Emergency Food

The data used for this study are from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Food Security Supplements, which have been collected each year since 1995. The CPS Food Security Supplements are administered to approximately 50,000 households each year. The food security data are primarily used to document the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger among U.S. households, but they also contain information on the use of food pantries and emergency kitchens. The use of emergency food assistance is likely to vary across different seasons of the year. Therefore, to ensure comparability across survey years, this analysis uses data from 1996, 1998, and 2000—years in which information on the use of emergency food assistance was collected in August or September.

### The 1996 Welfare Reform Legislation

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was designed to replace the system of cash entitlement with a system that promotes work. The legislation instituted a block grant to fund State welfare programs and gave States considerable flexibility in how they designed and implemented those programs. However, the legislation imposed time limits on the receipt of cash welfare benefits and imposed work requirements on cash welfare recipients.

The welfare reform legislation also imposed restrictions on eligibility for the Food Stamp Program. To receive food stamps, able-bodied adults without dependents must engage in work or a work-related activity at least 20 hours per week. Otherwise, their use of food stamps is limited to 3 months in any 36-month period, unless they reside in an area where the work requirement is waived due to a high unemployment rate. The legislation also eliminated the eligibility of most legal immigrants to receive food stamps, although it did make exceptions based on a legal immigrant’s refugee status, work history, or U.S. veteran status. Subsequent legislation in 1997 allowed legal immigrants who were disabled, elderly, or children living in the United States in August 1996 to regain eligibility for the Food Stamp Program. More recently, the 2002 farm bill restored food stamp eligibility to legal noncitizens who have lived in the United States continuously since August 1996.



This study focuses on the use of food pantries, since it is more accurately measured in the CPS Food Security Supplements than the use of emergency kitchens. The CPS sample does not include those who are homeless at the time of the survey and it may also miss those who are in tenuous housing situations. Previous studies have shown that a large portion of emergency kitchen users are homeless or tenuously housed. Food pantry users are unlikely to be homeless, since they generally must have access to cooking facilities. Indeed, past research has shown that very few food pantry users are homeless. To determine food pantry use, households were asked, "In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever get emergency food from a church, a food pantry, or food bank?" A separate question asked survey respondents whether anyone in the household had eaten at a soup kitchen in the previous 12 months.

This analysis separates respondents to the Food Security Supplements into five mutually exclusive categories of households that were distinctly affected by provisions of the 1996 welfare reform legislation. The first four groups consist of households whose head is a U.S. citizen: (1) single-parent families with children, (2) two-parent families with children, (3) adults between age 18 and 59, without children, and (4) adults age 60 and older, without children. The fifth group consists of households in which the household head is a noncitizen, regardless of household structure.

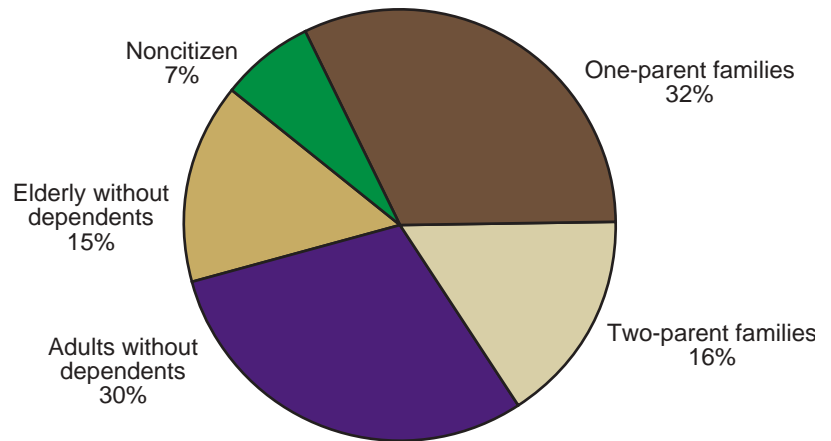
Single-parent families are the primary recipients of Federal cash assistance and comprise a majority of food stamp users. Therefore, most of the households affected by the changes to cash assistance will be from this group. In addition, changes in single-parent families' use of cash assistance may indirectly affect their use of food stamps. Receiving cash assistance historically qualified individuals

**Table 2—More Than 2.5 Million Households Used Food Pantries in 2000**

Category	Number of pantry users	Share of category that used food pantry
	Thousands	Percent
All households	2,524	2.4
Single-parent families	844	6.4
Two-parent families	396	1.4
Adults without dependents	748	1.8
Elderly without dependents	370	1.2
Noncitizens	167	2.3

Note: Households with a noncitizen head are included only in the noncitizens category, regardless of the structure of the household.  
Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the September 2000 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

**Figure 1—Households That Use Food Pantries Are Surprisingly Diverse, 2000**



Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the September 2000 Current Population Food Security Supplement.

for receipt of food stamps. Although many people who stopped receiving cash welfare were still eligible for food stamps, they stopped receiving them. They may have not realized that they were still eligible for the Food Stamp Program or they may have felt that it was not worth it to try to establish or maintain eligibility for food stamps if they were not going to receive cash assistance as well.

The welfare reform legislation placed direct limitations on the use of food stamps among two of the other types of households. The legislation instituted a work requirement for able-bodied adults, age 18 to 50, without dependents. The legislation also eliminated the eligibil-

ity of most legal immigrants to receive food stamps, although subsequent legislation has restored benefits to many legal immigrants.

The CPS data do not identify whether an individual is disabled, so some of the individuals categorized as able-bodied adults for this analysis may not be considered "able-bodied" for the purposes of determining their Food Stamp Program eligibility. In addition, the data do not identify if an individual lives in an area where the work requirement was waived. Therefore, some individuals in the category of able-bodied adults without dependents may have been able to maintain their eligibility to receive food stamps, which we would ex-

pect to reduce their need for emergency food assistance.

According to the CPS Food Security Supplement, more than 2.5 million households got food from a food pantry in 2000 (table 2). In contrast, an ERS-funded nationwide survey of emergency food users estimates that 4.3 million households used food pantries per month in 2001. This discrepancy in estimated number of users is likely a result of the different survey methods used. The CPS is known to undercount the use of Federal assistance programs, so it may also undercount the use of private food assistance from food pantries. The ERS-funded survey was conducted on a sample of users at selected food pantries over a 4-month period. Thus, the estimated number of users relies on assumptions about how representative the sample is of all food pantry users and about the patterns of food pantry use outside of the survey period to create an estimate of overall monthly use of food pantries.

### Households Were Less Likely To Use Food Pantries in 2000 Than in 1996...

Although the two surveys estimate different total numbers of households that use food pantries, they largely agree on the demographic composition of food pantry households. For example, both surveys find that households with children comprise about one-half of food pantry users. Nonetheless, households that use food pantries are diverse in terms of their family structure and the age and citizenship status of the household head (fig. 1).

Not surprisingly, the group that is most likely to be poor—single-parent families with children—is also most likely to use food pantries. One in sixteen single-parent families living in the United States received food from a food pantry in 2000, and these households accounted for about one-third of households that use food pantries. Households with children

accounted for about half of all households that used a food pantry. Households headed by a working-age adult without dependents also comprised a large percentage—almost 30 percent—of food pantry users. Households with an elderly head without dependents make up 15 percent of food pantry users.

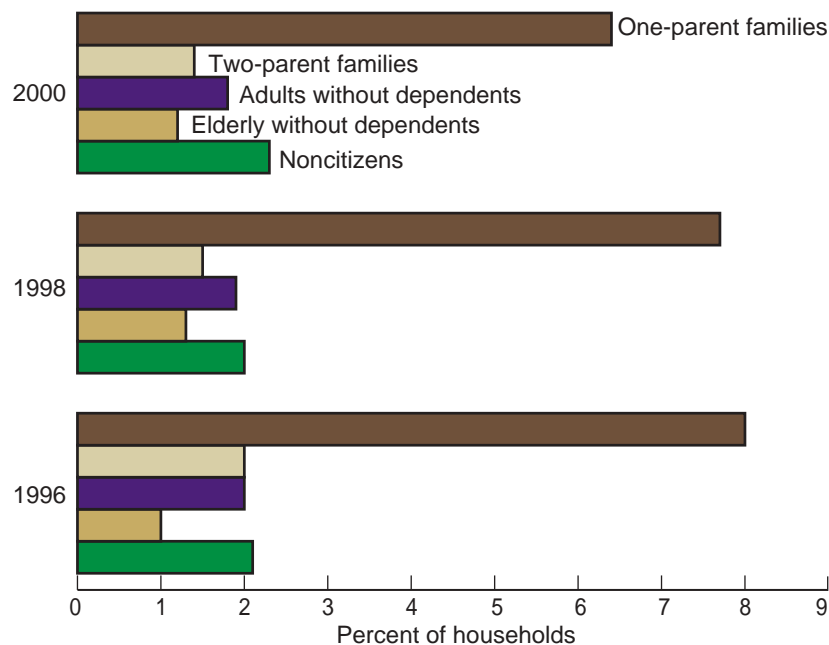
According to the CPS Food Security Supplements, the percentage of households using food pantries declined by roughly 10 percent from 1996 to 2000. Two of the three population subgroups most likely to be affected by the welfare reform legislation—single-parent families and able-bodied adults without dependents—were less likely to use food pantries in 2000 than in 1996 (fig. 2). Among households headed by a noncitizen, the slight increase shown in the likelihood of using a food pantry was not statistically significant. Therefore, it appears that, overall, the population subgroups targeted by the welfare reform legislation were not more likely to turn to food pantries

in 2000 than they had been in 1996. However, it is possible that within each subgroup, households that stopped receiving cash assistance or food stamps increased their use of food pantries between 1996 and 2000. The possibility of a shift from use of food stamps to use of food pantries within each subgroup is not addressed in this analysis.

### ...But the Number of Visits Made to Food Pantries Increased

Despite a decrease in the percentage of households that used a food pantry from 1996 to 2000, an increased frequency of visits to food pantries and population growth resulted in a modest increase in the total number of visits made to food pantries. Households in the CPS Food Security Supplement who reported that they got food from a church, food pantry, or food bank were asked, “How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every

Figure 2—Percentage of Households Using Food Pantries Dropped 10 Percent from 1996 to 2000



Note: These statistics are adjusted for the different screening methods used in each year, so that they are comparable across years.

Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the September 1996, August 1998, and September 2000 Current Population Food Security Supplements.

month, or in only 1 or 2 months?" We used the response to this question, which was not asked in 1996, to estimate the number of visits that households made to food pantries in 1998 and 2000.

Our estimates of the number of visits to food pantries are based on two assumptions. First, households are assumed to have visited a food pantry for the average number of months in the reported range. Households who reported going to a food pantry "almost every month" were assumed to have made 11 visits in the prior year, while those who reported going to a food pantry in "some months but not every month" were assumed to have made 6.5 visits in the prior year. Those that reported going to a food pantry in "only 1 or 2 months" were assumed to have made 1.5 visits in the prior year. Second, households are assumed to make only one visit to a food pantry per month. While the ERS-funded study of emergency food providers reports that almost half of food pantries limit households to one visit per month, some households could be making more than one visit per month. This analysis will not capture the extent to which households increased or decreased their frequency of visits per month.

Taking these assumptions into account, the number of visits made to food pantries is estimated to have increased by about 2 percent from 1998 to 2000, from 12.7 million visits in 1998 to 12.9 million visits in 2000. Other data sources indicate larger increases in the use of food pantries. For example, emergency food providers in the ERS-funded study believed demand at food pantries, as measured by number of households served, increased 16.5 percent overall between 1997 and 2000. America's Second Harvest, a national network of food banks that represents almost 80 percent of food banks in the country, reported an increase of almost 10 percent in the number of people using food pantries between 1997 and 2001.

## Food Pantry Visits Increase Only Among Households With Children

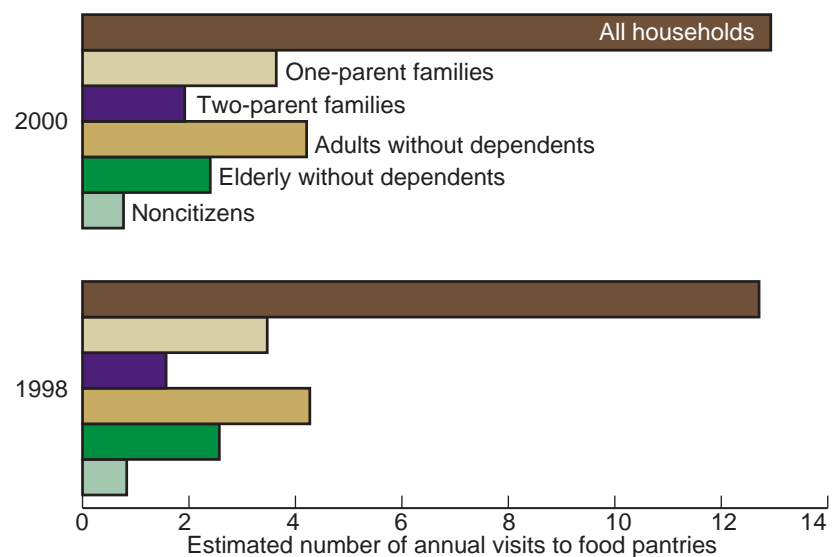
The strong economy in the mid-1990s would be expected to have led to a decline in the use of both public food assistance programs and emergency food assistance, as households became more able to provide food for themselves. On the other hand, while many households had members who became employed during the 1990s, their employment did not always raise their incomes above the poverty line. Census Bureau figures show that, in 2000, 7.6 percent of people in families with at least one worker had incomes below the poverty line. In fact, the share of poor families with at least one worker rose from 36 percent in 1993 to 44.5 percent in 2000.

The participation of low-income working families in the Food Stamp Program has historically been quite low. During the 1990s, only about half of eligible households with earnings used food stamps, while almost all eligible households that received cash

assistance used food stamps. Low-income working households may choose not to participate in the Food Stamp Program, even though they are eligible, for a variety of reasons. For instance, they may believe that their income will rise in the future and they will not need food stamps, or they may find the paperwork requirements too onerous for the amount of benefits they would receive. In either case, households may decide instead to turn to a food pantry if they need assistance.

The welfare reform legislation may also have affected the use of emergency food assistance. The eligibility restrictions on food stamp receipt by noncitizens and able-bodied adults without dependents might lead to an increase in food pantry use if these groups shifted from reliance on public food assistance to reliance on private assistance. In addition, the stricter work requirements and the imposition of time limits in the cash assistance system may have prompted single-parent families to leave the public assistance rolls before achieving full self-sufficiency and increased

**Figure 3—Households With Children Drive Increase in Food Pantry Visits, 1998-2000**



Note: These statistics are adjusted for the different screening methods used in each year, so that they are comparable across years.

Source: Calculated by USDA's Economic Research Service using data from the August 1998 and September 2000 Current Population Food Security Supplements.

their reliance on private food assistance from food pantries.

Households with children accounted for the entire increase in the estimated number of visits made to food pantries (fig. 3). Two-parent families with children, who made over 20 percent more visits to food pantries in 2000 than in 1998, experienced the largest increase in visits. While single-parent families did not experience as large an increase in food pantry visits as two-parent families, they, too, turned to food banks more often in 2000 than in 1998—3.6 million visits in 2000, up from 3.5 million visits in 1998. The increase in food pantry visits among households with children occurred when Food Stamp Program participation among this group was on the decline. This increase suggests that at least some of these households continued to need food assistance, despite their decreased use of Federal food assistance programs.

Noncitizen households and able-bodied adults without dependents, as well as elderly adults without dependents, experienced a decrease in their visits to food pantries from 1998 to 2000. The participation of noncitizens and able-bodied adults without dependents in the Food Stamp Program decreased over this time period. Although able-bodied adults without dependents made fewer visits to food pantries in 2000 than in 1998, they made the greatest number of visits to food pantries of any of the population subgroups in both 1998 and 2000.

While the strong economic conditions of the mid-1990s are likely to have contributed to the decline in food pantry use by noncitizen households and working-age adults without dependents, this analysis does not estimate whether their use of food pantries would have fallen even more in the absence of the restrictions imposed on their Food Stamp Program eligibility. However, the evidence does indicate that the restrictions on their

eligibility to receive food stamps did not lead to an increased reliance on food pantries. The restoration of benefits to a number of legal immigrants, as mandated in the 2002 farm bill, is expected to increase their participation in the Food Stamp Program, which may further decrease their reliance on food pantries.

The CPS data show that households were less likely to use food pantries in 2000 than in 1996. However, households with children made 10 percent more visits to food pantries in 2000 than in 1998. This increase suggests the need to continue to monitor the food assistance needs of this population. The data also show that able-bodied adults without dependents account for the largest proportion of visits to food pantries. Their heavy reliance on food pantries warrants further attention. It may be that these households, even those whose members are employed, are not able to earn enough to make ends meet. Further analysis of the relationship between employment status and the use of Federal and emergency food assistance can suggest ways in which these programs can best serve this population.

In addition, it is important to note that households may have increased their reliance on other forms of emergency food assistance, such as emergency kitchens, which are not measured in this study. Understanding patterns of use of food pantries and other emergency food assistance can help shape Federal food assistance programs and Federal support to emergency food providers. Federal policies that are based on information about the use of both private and Federal food assistance will be most effective in coordinating food assistance for those in need.

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