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Emergency Providers Help Poor Households Put Food on the Table

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In 2003, USDA spent \$41.7 billion on 15 food assistance programs aimed at improving the nutrition and well-being of needy Americans. The Food Stamp Program, the largest of the programs, served over 21 million people, and 16.4 million school children received free or reduced-price lunches from the National School Lunch Program. Yet, 4.3 million American households visited a food pantry, and 1.1 million people ate a meal at an emergency kitchen in a typical month in 2001.

Why do people turn to emergency food assistance providers? Who are food pantries and emergency kitchens serving? Does emergency food assistance supplement or replace Federal food assistance? Emergency food providers serve a diverse population, and they do not serve the same purpose for all users. For some, emergency food providers help the household weather a short-term setback, like an unexpected medical bill or car repair. For others, especially those who visit emergency kitchens, this food assistance may be their one hot meal a day.

According to a two-phase national study funded by ERS, many food pantry users across the Nation also participate in the Food Stamp Program and the National School Lunch Program, suggesting that their food pantry or emergency kitchen use supplements, not replaces, Federal food assistance. Another study in Kansas City, MO, found just that: Some low-income households occasionally visit food pantries to supplement food stamp benefits. Emergency food users who do not participate in the Food Stamp Program most commonly report that they do not apply for the program because they doubt that they are eligible, the application process is too difficult, or they do not want help from the Government.

The ERS-funded study estimates that almost 33,000 food pantries and over 5,000 emergency kitchens operate in the United States (see box, "Who Provides Emergency Food?"). Food pantries and emergency kitchens are the street-level providers of emergency food assistance, distributing food directly to needy house-

holds. Food pantries provide bags of food to households to prepare meals at home. Emergency kitchens provide prepared meals that are eaten at the site.

Food pantries and emergency kitchens, together with food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations, make up the country's emergency food assistance system (EFAS). EFAS organizations generally provide food to anyone who requests it, although some may limit access based on a person's place of residence or household income. Because of the minimal eligibility restrictions and documentation requirements, households experiencing a sudden or unexpected need can quickly access the system, even on an emergency basis.

Who Uses Emergency Food?

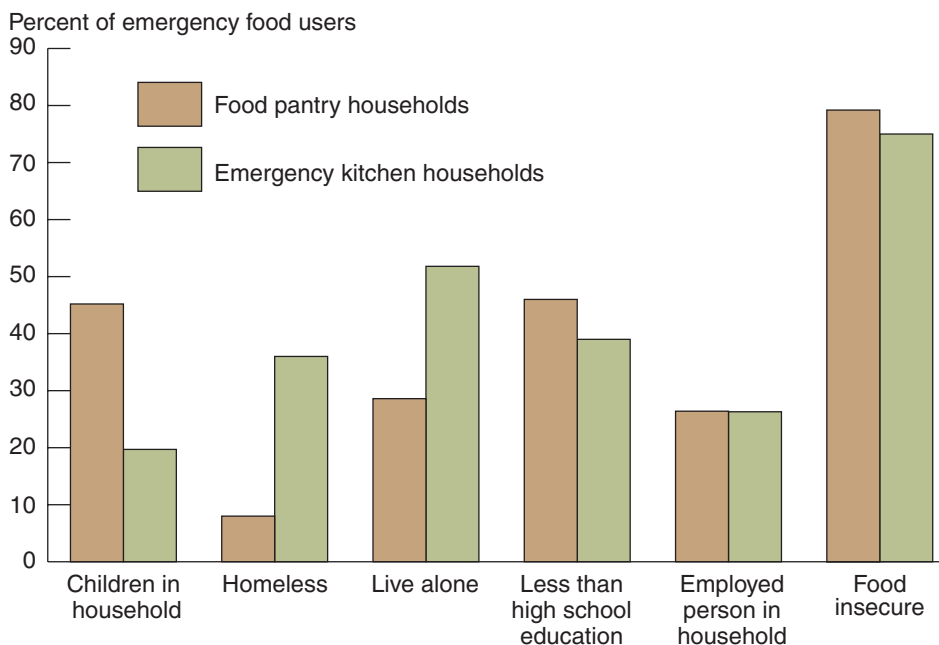
Food pantries and emergency kitchens provided an estimated 198 million meals in an average month in 2000. During a typical month in 2001, about 4.3 million different households, including 8.0 million adults and 4.5 million chil-



Nancy Jagelka, Bread for the City

Many food pantries are at their busiest during the holiday season. Over 7,000 families in Washington, DC, received a holiday meal through Bread for the City's 2003 Holiday Helping Campaign.

Food pantries and emergency kitchens serve a diverse population



dren, received food from pantries, and about 1.1 million people (856,000 adults and 275,000 children) received meals from emergency kitchens. These findings suggest that the average food pantry household receives food for 14 meals per person per month, and the average emergency kitchen user receives 14 meals per month.

Emergency food providers serve a diverse clientele in terms of household composition, race and ethnicity, education, and employment. About half of households that visit food pantries have children in them, and few of the families are homeless. People that use emergency kitchens, on the other hand, are most likely to live alone, and almost 40 percent are homeless. About 46 percent of adult pantry users and 39 percent of adult emergency kitchen users have less than a high school education. Although their low levels of education are likely to limit employment possibilities, about a fourth of

Who Provides Emergency Food?

The ERS-funded study gathered information from over 3,000 food pantries and emergency kitchens between March and November 2000. Food pantries and emergency kitchens were selected from a list of organizations identified by food banks, food rescue organizations, emergency food organizations, and other social service agencies.

The study found that food pantries and emergency kitchens are typically small, community-based organizations. About two-thirds of food pantries and emergency kitchens report that they are affiliated with a religious organization. On an average day, 60 percent of food pantries serve fewer than 25 households. Over half operate with an annual budget of less than \$5,000. Emergency kitchens vary more in size than food pantries. Just under a third of emergency kitchens have annual budgets of less than \$5,000, while more than a fourth had an annual budget of \$20,000 or more. About a third of emergency kitchens serve fewer than 50 people at a typical lunch, the most common meal served at emergency kitchens. However, in the largest 15 percent of emergency kitchens, over 200 people received lunch on a typical day.

Almost all organizations in the EFAS rely on volunteers to assist in their operations. About a fourth of food pantries and half of emergency kitchens did not employ a single paid staff person. Most food pantries and emergency kitchens are connected to an organization—a food bank, food rescue organization, or emergency food organization—that acts as a “wholesaler,” receiving food donations from a variety of sources and distributing them to food pantries or emergency kitchens. Most wholesalers in the EFAS have paid employees, as well as volunteers.

In 2003, USDA provided almost \$400 million worth of food to States for distribution to emergency food providers, through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

In addition, USDA provided about \$50 million in administrative funds to State agencies to support their food distribution. State agencies must establish income eligibility standards to ensure that TEFAP foods provided for household distribution go only to low-income households. For TEFAP foods used in meal preparation at emergency kitchens, no eligibility standards are required, but providers must serve predominately needy persons. Although the amount of commodities available through TEFAP has varied throughout the history of the program, USDA commodities accounted for nearly 14 percent of all food distributed by emergency food providers in 2000.



Nancy Jagelka, Bread for the City

households that use pantries or emergency kitchens have an employed person in them.

Over 90 percent of food pantry households and 85 percent of emergency kitchen households have incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line (the income cutoff for Food Stamp Program eligibility). Monthly income averages \$781 for pantry households and \$708 for emergency kitchen households. About three-fourths of food pantry and emergency

kitchen households are food insecure, which means they have a limited ability to acquire food because of financial constraints. Two in five emergency kitchen households and one in four pantry households have said that an adult in the household did not eat for an entire day at some time in the last year because they did not have enough money to buy food.

Many EFAS Users Participate in Federal Food Assistance Programs...

The ERS-funded study collected extensive information between August and November 2001 about emergency food users' eligibility for and use of Federal food assistance programs. Program eligibility was calculated using information about a household's income and assets, and the number and age of children in the households. According to the study, 69 percent of pantry households and 45 percent of emergency

kitchen households used both private and Federal food assistance.

EFAS households were more likely to be eligible for and to participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) than any other Federal food assistance program. About 9 in 10 pantry households and more than 8 in 10 emergency kitchen households were eligible for the FSP. Almost half of pantry households and more than a third of emergency kitchen households received food stamps in the year before the survey, with most receiving food stamps and emergency food assistance in the same month.

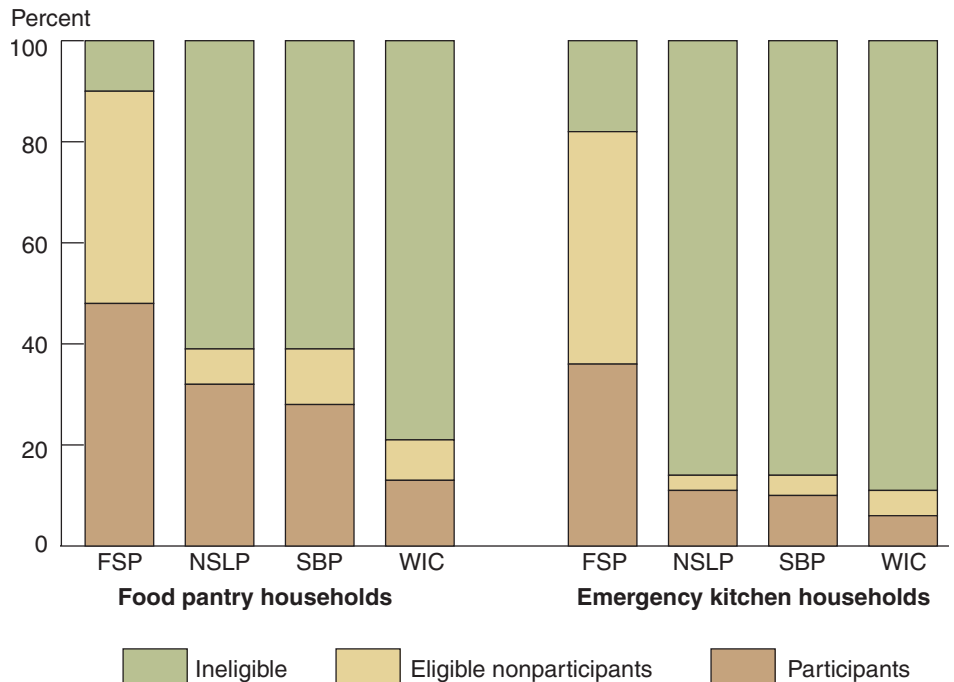
While more pantry and emergency kitchen households participated in the FSP than in other Federal food assistance programs, the rate of participation among eligible households was highest in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Over 80 percent of the households who visited a food pantry or emergency kitchen and met the eligibility require-



Ken Hammond, USDA

USDA outreach grants support efforts by emergency food providers to prescreen families for Food Stamp Program eligibility and assist them with the application process.

Food stamps are the most common Federal food assistance received by emergency food users





Michael S. Yamashita, Corbis

Emergency kitchens across the United States serve almost half a million meals on an average day.

ments for the NSLP had a child who received free or reduced-price lunches. Children in eligible EFAS households participated at a slightly lower rate (70 percent) in the School Breakfast Program (SBP). EFAS households were less likely to participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides benefits only to pregnant and breastfeeding low-income women and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk.

...Though Many Eligible Households Do Not

Almost half of pantry and emergency kitchen users were FSP-eligible nonparticipants in the year before the survey—that is, they were eligible to receive food stamps but did not. Between 70 and 80 percent of these eligible nonparticipants reported that they had not even applied to the FSP in the year before the survey.

These eligible nonparticipants gave a variety of reasons for not applying. Over a

Emergency food users gave a variety of reasons for not applying for food stamps

Reasons for not applying	Food pantry users	Emergency kitchen users
	Percent of eligible nonparticipants who have not applied for food stamps	
Doubt eligibility, sanctioned or lost eligibility	46.8	36.3
Prefer not to receive help from the Government	8.8	11.0
Too much paperwork, can't fill out application forms	8.2	8.2
Small benefits are not worth the effort	8.2	4.2
No longer need food stamps	6.4	9.3
Do not know about the Food Stamp Program or how to get benefits	5.1	11.5
Do not have transportation to the food stamp office	4.9	2.9
Feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about getting food stamps	4.6	7.4
Questions are too personal	1.2	1.3
Food stamp office hours are inconvenient	1.0	0.5
Negative attitudes of food stamp office staff	0.8	0.4

For people living paycheck to paycheck, an unexpected expense, such as a car repair, can necessitate a trip to a food pantry or emergency kitchen.



USDA/ERS



Ken Hammond, USDA

third who visited emergency kitchens and almost half who visited food pantries doubted that they were eligible, with some saying that they had been sanctioned or lost eligibility in the past. Another 10 percent preferred not to receive help from the Government. For this group, emergency food assistance providers appear to operate as a substitute for Federal food assistance. About 8 percent said that there was too much paperwork involved in applying for the FSP, and 4 to 8 percent said that the small benefits were not worth the effort. Smaller numbers said that they did not apply because they did not know about the program or how to apply for it. Emergency food providers may be a valuable link to these households, and could provide information about Federal food assistance programs and the application process and help households determine their expected benefits. Only 16 percent of food pantries and emergency kitchens, however, report-

ed that they provide counseling to households about their eligibility for Federal food assistance programs.

USDA is currently funding initiatives for emergency food providers to develop ways to help households access Federal food assistance programs. For example, food banks in Delaware and New York have developed methods to prescreen households for FSP eligibility and to assist them in the application process.

Patterns of Food Stamp and Food Pantry Use Over Time: Evidence from Kansas City, Missouri

ERS collaborated with the University of Missouri-Columbia to learn more about the patterns in household use of emergency food and the Food Stamp Program. The data used in the analysis covered a broader time frame than most studies of emergency food assistance, and did not rely on an emergency food user's ability to recall past use of emergency and Federal food assistance.

The research used a unique database to examine household use of food pantries between January 1998 and May 2001. Food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area recorded in the database the number and value of services they provided to households each month. The University of Missouri-Columbia and ERS researchers were able to link data on food pantry visits and food stamp use for the 85,258 households that used at least one of these forms of food assistance during the study period.

The researchers found that four times as many households used food stamps as used food pantries in a given month. And, food stamp households used food stamps more often than food pantry households used food pantries. Between January 1998 and May 2001, the average food stamp

Emergency food providers represent a connection to a population that may benefit from Federal food assistance.

household received benefits in 12 months, whereas the average food pantry household received aid in only 5 of the observed months and rarely in consecutive months.

The researchers also found that almost 60 percent of food pantry households also received food stamps some time during the period, implying that, for many food pantry households, food pantry use does not reflect a lack of access to the FSP.

On the other hand, roughly 40 percent of food pantry households did not receive food stamps at any time between January 1998 and May 2001. Would the households that relied only on food pantries have been better served by the FSP? The analysis indicated that these households averaged two visits to a food pantry over the 3½-year study. The greater flexibility and immediacy of food pantries allow them to meet these households' needs for sporadic, short-term food assistance, which may be difficult for the FSP to do.

The data from Kansas City also allowed food stamp households and their reliance on food pantries to be examined. Such an analysis is not possible with the national survey data because they include only a sample of emergency food users.

The extent to which food stamp recipients also rely on food pantries may provide some indication of the adequacy of food stamp benefits. The analysis found that almost two-thirds of food stamp households did not visit a food pantry at any time during the study period, implying that many food stamp households do not turn to food pantries as a way to supplement their food stamp benefits. And, the 37 percent of food stamp households that did use a food pantry, did not do so regularly. In almost any given month during the study, less than 10 percent of food stamp households supplemented their food stamp benefits by visiting a food pantry.

Emergency food providers play an important role in providing food assistance and also represent a connection to a population that may benefit from Federal food assistance. More attention to those who use emergency food and to their use of Federal food assistance can help ensure that the EFAS and Federal food assistance programs work together to most effectively reach those in need. *W*

This article is drawn from . . .

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