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ISSUES

IN FOOD ASSISTANCE

Private Provision of Food Aid: The Emergency Food Assistance System

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Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 26-5

August 2002

Issue: Although Federal programs provide the bulk of food assistance in the United States, with benefits worth more than \$32 billion in 2000, many needy households also utilize private, nonprofit, charitable organizations that provide emergency food in their communities. Yet policymakers have had limited information available to them on these organizations, which comprise the emergency food assistance system (EFAS). This issues brief reports findings from the first comprehensive government study of the EFAS.

The study provides detailed information about the system’s operations and about each of the major types of organizations involved in the system. The research also examines how the EFAS fits within the context of important government nutrition assistance programs, such as the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and describes the role of Federal commodity assistance programs in the system. It updates past studies of the EFAS, extending these studies to provide a broader, more nationally representative view of the system.

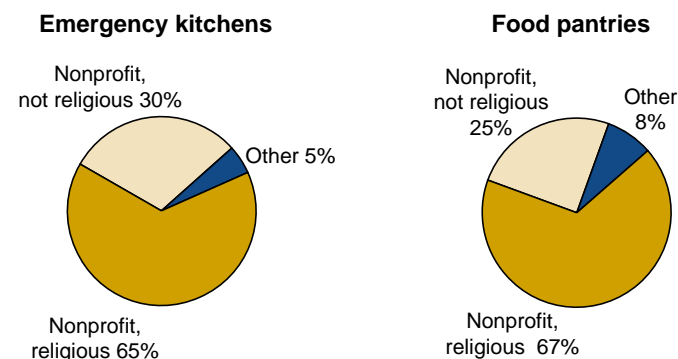
Background: Many low-income people use emergency food providers. The EFAS has evolved into a fairly structured system, in which food pantries and emergency kitchens (often called soup kitchens) function as the “retailers” in the system, providing food directly to households and individuals. At food pantries, households receive bags of food that they take with them to prepare meals at home. Emergency kitchens provide a prepared meal for their clients to eat onsite. Most food pantries and emergency kitchens are connected to a “wholesaler” in the EFAS—a food bank, food rescue organization, or an emergency food organization.

The wholesalers in the system receive food donations in bulk from a variety of sources and distribute them to food pantries and emergency kitchens in their area. Food banks obtain mostly nonperishable food from national and regional sources, while food rescue organizations seek out

sources of perishable food, such as retailers, food service operations, and farmers. Many food banks, food pantries, and emergency kitchens also receive and distribute U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodities. In addition, emergency feeding organizations (EFOs), such as community action agencies or local government agencies, act as wholesalers to receive and distribute commodities from USDA or other sources. Most EFOs do not focus on food distribution and participate in the EFAS only when USDA commodities become available (see box p. 2).

Findings: There are nearly 34,000 food pantries and more than 5,000 emergency kitchens in the United States. Food pantries and emergency kitchens are typically small, locally based organizations. Many street-level providers of emergency food are faith-based organizations. About two-thirds of emergency kitchens and food pantries are affiliated with a religious group (fig. 1). Almost 60 percent of food pantries serve fewer than 25 households on an average day, and more than half of food pantries operate with an annual budget of less than \$5,000. Emergency kitchens tend to be more variable in size than food pantries. Almost one in three emergency kitchens operates

Figure 1—Faith-based organizations in the Emergency Food Assistance System



Source: Ohls et al., 2002.

Organizations in the Emergency Food Assistance System

		Estimated number
Direct providers		
Emergency kitchens	Also known as soup kitchens, they provide prepared meals for clients to eat at the site.	5,262
Food pantries	Distribute groceries for households to prepare elsewhere, usually at home.	32,737
Wholesalers		
Food banks	Obtain most nonperishable food nationally and regionally and distribute it to individual direct providers.	402
Food rescue organizations	Seek sources of perishable food and make it available to direct providers.	91
Emergency food organizations	Are community action agencies or local government agencies, designated by some States as official distributors of USDA commodities, although their primary purpose is something other than food distribution.	124

with an annual budget of less than \$5,000, while more than a fourth have 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, the largest 15 percent of emergency kitchens provide lunch to more than 200 people on a typical day.

Almost all EFAS providers rely on volunteers to assist in their operations, and many food pantries and emergency kitchens rely solely on volunteers. About a fourth of food pantries and half of emergency kitchens do not employ a single paid staff person (fig. 2). In contrast, most of the wholesalers in the EFAS employ paid workers, as well as volunteers.

Despite the modest size and local nature of most EFAS providers, they reach a large number of households in the United States. Data from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement indicate that more than 2.5 million households used food pantries and 414,000 households had at least 1 member who ate at an emergency kitchen during 2000. The 2.5 million households that received food from a food pantry contained 3.1 million children and 4.4 million adults. While the use of emergency kitchens was less prevalent, the estimate of 414,000 households almost certainly understates the number of people who use emergency kitchens, since it

does not include the number of homeless individuals who resort to these providers.¹

While the EFAS provides a valuable service to millions of households, the system is small relative to Federal food programs. Food pantries and emergency kitchens provided an estimated 198 million meals per month in 2000. The 5 largest Federal food assistance programs provided 1.9 billion meals per month in 2000, more than 9 times as many meals as the EFAS (fig. 3). The Food Stamp Program, the largest Federal food assistance program, served approximately 7.3 million households per month in 2000.

In addition to its own provision of food assistance, the Federal Government has a significant direct involvement with many emergency food providers, who distribute USDA commodities, or meals prepared with them, to households, mainly through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Roughly 85 percent of food

¹ The number of households estimated to use food pantries is considerably lower than the number found in a recent nationwide survey of clients at emergency food providers. This discrepancy in estimated number of users is likely a result of the different methodologies used for data collection. The Current Population Survey data are known to undercount the use of Federal assistance programs, so they also may undercount the use of private food assistance from food pantries. Conversely, the survey of EFAS clients was conducted on a sample of emergency food clients, and estimates of the total number of households were based on survey information about respondents' patterns of emergency food use.

banks in the United States receive USDA commodities, and about half of food pantries and emergency kitchens report using USDA commodities (fig. 4).² EFAS providers distributed roughly 422 million pounds of USDA commodities in 2000, which accounted for nearly 14 percent of all food distributed by the EFAS (fig. 5).

The amount of commodities available through TEFAP has varied throughout the history of the program, but the 1996 welfare reform legislation set funding for the purchase of commodities through TEFAP at \$100 million per year through fiscal year 2002. Emergency food providers also receive administrative funding support through TEFAP for use in paying costs associated with the distribution of USDA commodities and commodities obtained from other sources.

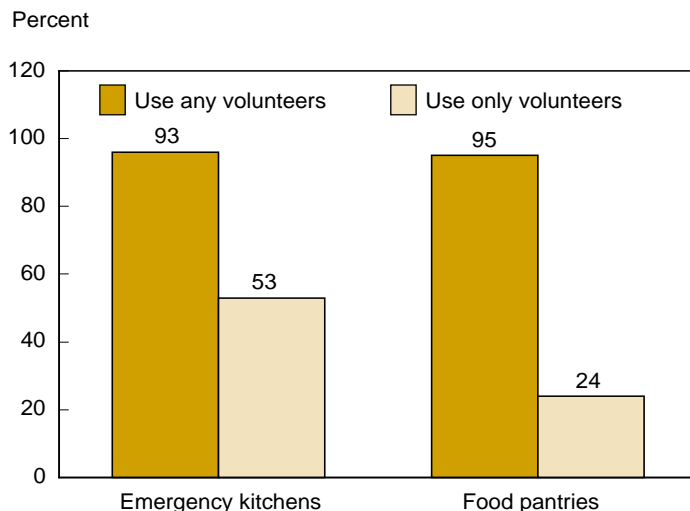
Through TEFAP, emergency food providers receive Federal support for their activities and serve as the delivery vehicle for the Federal Government's provision of emergency food assistance. Because many direct providers of emergency food are affiliated with a religious group, TEFAP represents longstanding Federal cooperation with faith-based and community organizations in social service activities. This partnership with EFAS providers is particularly relevant in light of the current emphasis on Federal support of faith-based and community organizations.

Community-level and faith-based emergency food providers display a considerable degree of flexibility and innovation in their food acquisition and distribution methods. However, there is also evidence that emergency food providers may not always be able to reach those who need them. Although emergency food providers rarely turn people away due to lack of food, these providers do limit food distribution. The typical food pantry is open 2 to 3 days per week and for fewer than 4 hours each day. About half of food pantries limit households to receiving food once per month or less. More than half of emergency kitchens serve meals only on weekdays, and a third serve meals only 1 day per week.

The nonmetro poor appear to be underserved by emergency kitchens while the metro poor appear to be underserved by food pantries. About 15 percent of emergency kitchens operate in nonmetropolitan areas, although those areas contain 21 percent of the poor population. Conversely, about 70 percent of food pantries operate in metropolitan

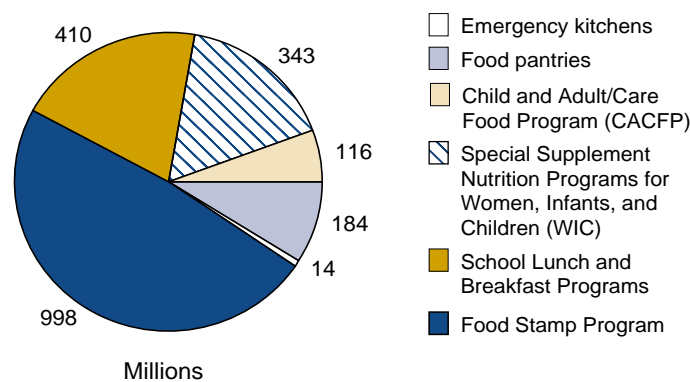
² There are probably even more direct providers that distribute USDA commodities. Many commodities are not easily distinguishable, since they no longer bear USDA packaging. In particular, some emergency kitchen staff may not be aware that they are distributing USDA commodities since, unlike food pantries, emergency kitchens are not faced with government regulations on to whom and how often they may distribute USDA commodities.

Figure 2—Use of volunteer and paid staff emergency kitchens and food pantries, 2000



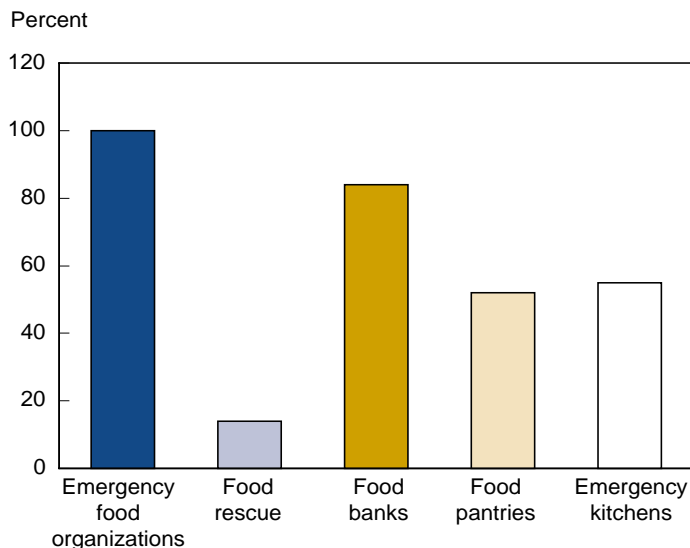
Source: Ohls et al., 2002.

Figure 3—Meals distributed by emergency kitchens, food pantries, and USDA programs per month, 2000

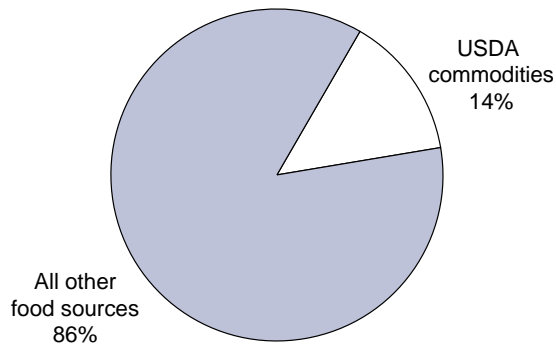


Source: Ohls et al., 2002.

Figure 4—Percentage of EFAS providers who distribute USDA commodities



Source: Ohls et al., 2002.

Figure 5—USDA commodities as a share of food distributed by the EFAS, 2000

Source: Ohls et al., 2002.

areas, which contain 79 percent of the poor population. The low prevalence of emergency kitchens in nonmetropolitan areas is most likely explained by problems of access and transportation that make them impractical in these areas, as well as by the lower concentration of the homeless in nonmetropolitan areas. While this pattern is a perfectly reasonable response to the environment in which individual EFAS providers operate, it does raise the concern that emergency kitchen services may be relatively inaccessible to some nonmetropolitan households that need them, and that food pantry services may be relatively inaccessible to some metropolitan households who would prefer them.

Overall, 2.4 percent of U.S. households received food from a food pantry in 2000. Households at or near poverty levels were much more likely to get food from a food pantry than households with higher income. Not surprisingly, then, food pantry use was especially high among the kinds of households most likely to be poor. One in 12 households headed by a single female used a food pantry, and households with an African-American head were over twice as likely as the average household to get food from a food pantry. Food pantry use is also more prevalent in food-insecure households. A household is considered food insecure if it reports having certain difficulties meeting its food needs due to financial constraints. Food-insecure households were 24 times more likely than food-secure households to have obtained food from a food pantry in 2000.

While households are much more likely to use Federal food assistance than to use emergency food providers, many households use both forms of food assistance. For instance, almost 60 percent of low-income households (those with income below 130 percent of the poverty line) that received food from a food pantry at some time in 2000 had also received food stamps at some time during that year.

However, more than 40 percent of low-income households that used a food pantry at some time during 2000 did not receive food stamps during that year, even though their annual household income was low enough for them to be eligible. Some of these households were likely to be ineligible for food stamps despite their low income. Their assets may have been higher than the eligibility limits, they may have lost their food stamp benefits because they failed to comply with Food Stamp Program or other public assistance program rules, or they may have been barred from participating because they were not U.S. citizens.

Other eligible households may have not applied for food stamps because the benefits they would have received would have been too low to offset the costs of applying, or they felt embarrassed or uncomfortable about receiving public assistance. Some households, though, may have been eligible and not realized it. These households would benefit from information about Federal food assistance eligibility guidelines. However, very few EFAS providers were found to provide this information. Only 16 percent of emergency kitchens and 17 percent of food pantries reported providing counseling to their clients regarding Food Stamp Program or WIC eligibility guidelines.

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