The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey, Volume I: Executive Summary. By James Ohls and Fazana Saleem-Ismail of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 16-1.

Abstract

Findings of the first comprehensive government study of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) suggest that public and private food assistance may work in tandem to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide by itself. Five major types of organizations (emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations) that operate in the EFAS were studied. About 5,300 emergency kitchens provide more than 173 million meals a year, and 32,700 food pantries distribute about 2.9 billion pounds of food a year, which translates into roughly 2,200 million meals. Despite the substantial amounts of food distributed by the system, the EFAS remains much smaller in scale than the Federal programs. The study, which was sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service, provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of the five types of organizations. This report summarizes the results of the study. For more detail on the results, see *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey, Volume II: Final Report* at http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr16. For more information on the survey methodology, see *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey, Volume III: Survey Methodology* at http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008.

Keywords: Food pantry, emergency kitchen, food bank, food rescue organization, emergency food organization, TEFAP.

This report was prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., under a research contract with the Economic Research Service. The views expressed are those of Mathematica and not necessarily those of ERS or USDA.

Washington, DC 20036-5831 June 2002

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Linda Kantor, the USDA project officer for most of the study, for her guidance, assistance, and flexibility. Valuable input has also been received from a number of other USDA staff members, including Laura Tiehen (the USDA project officer for the final stage of the study), David Smallwood, Margaret Andrews, Steven Carlson, Craig Gundersen, Bob DeLorenzo, Pat McKinney, Mark Nord, and Parke Wilde.

Important assistance in data collection was provided by Nancy Clusen and Daisy Ewell, who helped to design the sampling approach and drew the sample; Barbara Kolln, who supervised the computer programming for the telephone data collection; Jennifer McNeill, who programmed the instrument for computer-assistance telephone interviewing; Renee Harris and Tom Barton, who managed the actual survey operations; Kim Zito, who oversaw sample location activities; Bea Jones, who oversaw the development of the sampling frame; and Bharat Thakor, who developed the survey tracking computer system.

Larry Radbill made important contribution to the early design of the research and made many valuable suggestions in his role as the quality assurance reader for this report. Amy Zambrowski provided highly effective work in designing and implementing the file construction process, while Melynda Ihrig efficiently produced many rounds of SAS tabulations of the data. Julie Brys also helped with the programming at critical points.

Valuable suggestions about an earlier draft of the report were provided by Martha Burt, Ronette Briefel, Doug O'Brien, Lynn Parker, Barbara Cohen, and Brendan O'Flaherty.

Laura Berenson and Roy Grisham edited the entire manuscript, substantially improving its clarity. They were helped by Patricia Ciaccio. Additional valuable editorial support was provided by Courtney Knauth at USDA.

Jane Nelson provided extraordinary support in organizing the production of the manuscript of the report. She was assisted by Jill Miller, Cindy McClure, Marjorie Mitchell, Jennifer Baskwell, and Monica Capizzi-Linder.

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Summary

Findings of the first comprehensive government study of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) suggest that public and private food assistance may work in tandem to provide more comprehensive services than either could provide by itself. Five major types of organizations (emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations) that operate in the EFAS were studied. The research, which was sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service, provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of these five types of organizations. This report summarizes the results of the study.

The EFAS helps ensure adequate nutrition for low-income Americans who may not have the resources to purchase sufficient food in stores and who may not be able to acquire sufficient food through government programs. Across the country, thousands of emergency kitchens and food pantries provide food assistance to people throughout the year. Regional and national organizations, such as food banks and the food banks' national-level representatives, help the provider agencies obtain food and other resources necessary to accomplish their mission. The EFAS provides meals and food supplies that, for many recipients, complement existing government food assistance programs.

The study was conducted when the effects of the 1996 national welfare reform were becoming visible throughout the country. It examined how the EFAS is operating within the larger context of changes in America's low-income assistance policies and how the EFAS fits within the context of important government nutrition assistance programs. It updates past studies of the EFAS and extends them to provide a broader, more nationally representative view of the system. Additional information will be obtained in a survey of EFAS clients, conducted in fall 2001.

Key findings:

- About 5,300 emergency kitchens and 32,700 food pantries participate in the EFAS. The kitchens provide more than 173 million meals. The pantries distribute an estimated 2.9 billion pounds of food per year, which translates into roughly 6 million meals per day, or 2,200 million meals per year.

- Despite the substantial amounts of food distributed by the system, the EFAS remains much smaller in scale than the Federal programs that provide food assistance to the poor.

- The EFAS is mostly locally based, with a wide variety of program structures and innovative practices that meet differing local needs and that use differing local resources and local opportunities.

- Many direct service providers in the EFAS—65 percent of emergency kitchens and 67 percent of food pantries—are faith-based organizations.

- The EFAS extensively uses volunteers.

- Although most kitchens and pantries do not turn away people because of lack of food, they do limit their food distribution. In about 40 percent of pantries, households are limited to receiving food once per month or less, and one-third of kitchens serve meals only one day per week.

- During the 12 months before our survey, about 25 percent of kitchens and 33 percent of pantries turned away people who requested services, mostly because the individuals in question were disruptive, had substance abuse problems, or failed to meet residency requirements or income guidelines. Most kitchens and pantries did not turn away people because of lack of food.

- About one-fourth of both emergency kitchens and food pantries perceived that there are unmet needs for their services. More than half of food banks and food rescue organizations reported facing unmet needs.

- In contrast to the geographic distribution of the low-income population, emergency kitchens are disproportionately available in metropolitan (versus nonmetropolitan) settings. For example, only 15 percent of kitchens are located in nonmetropolitan areas, whereas 21 percent of America's poor population live in these areas. Furthermore, kitchens in nonmetropolitan areas tend to serve fewer people than kitchens in metropolitan areas.

- The EFAS may not provide consistent coverage across different parts of the day or days of the week.

- About 89 percent of kitchens and 87 percent of pantries believed they could deal with a 5-percent increase in the need for their services, and about one-third thought that they could deal effectively with as much as a 20-percent increase in need.

The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey

Volume I: Executive Summary

James Ohls
Fazana Saleem-Ismail

Introduction

This report describes the results of the first comprehensive government study of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS). Sponsored by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the study provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of the major types of organizations involved in the system.[1]

USDA's decision to conduct the study reflects both the agency's specific involvement with certain parts of the EFAS—most important, by providing commodities through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)—and a more general goal of examining whether existing public and private programs work in complementary ways to end hunger and improve the nutrition of low-income people. Key objectives of the project were as follows:

- Describe, using a nationally representative sample, the characteristics, operating structures, and service areas of food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations.
- Describe the resource bases of food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations, as well as assess the capacity of these providers to manage current and future needs for emergency food.
- Estimate the total quantity and types of food, by source, that flow into the food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations.
- Estimate the total number of recipients served by each type of EFAS provider.

The study was conducted during a period when the effects of the 1996 national welfare reform were becoming increasingly visible throughout the country. It thus affords an opportunity to examine how the EFAS is operating within this larger context of changes in America's low-income assistance policies.

The research also allows us to examine 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). It updates past studies of the EFAS (Second Harvest, 1998; Poppendieck, 1998; and Burt et al., 1999), extending these studies to provide a broader, more nationally representative view of the system. Additional information will be obtained in a survey of EFAS clients, conducted in fall 2001.

[1]The complete findings of the study discussed in this summary are available in Ohls and Saleem-Ismail, 2001.

Brief Description of the Organizations Participating in the EFAS

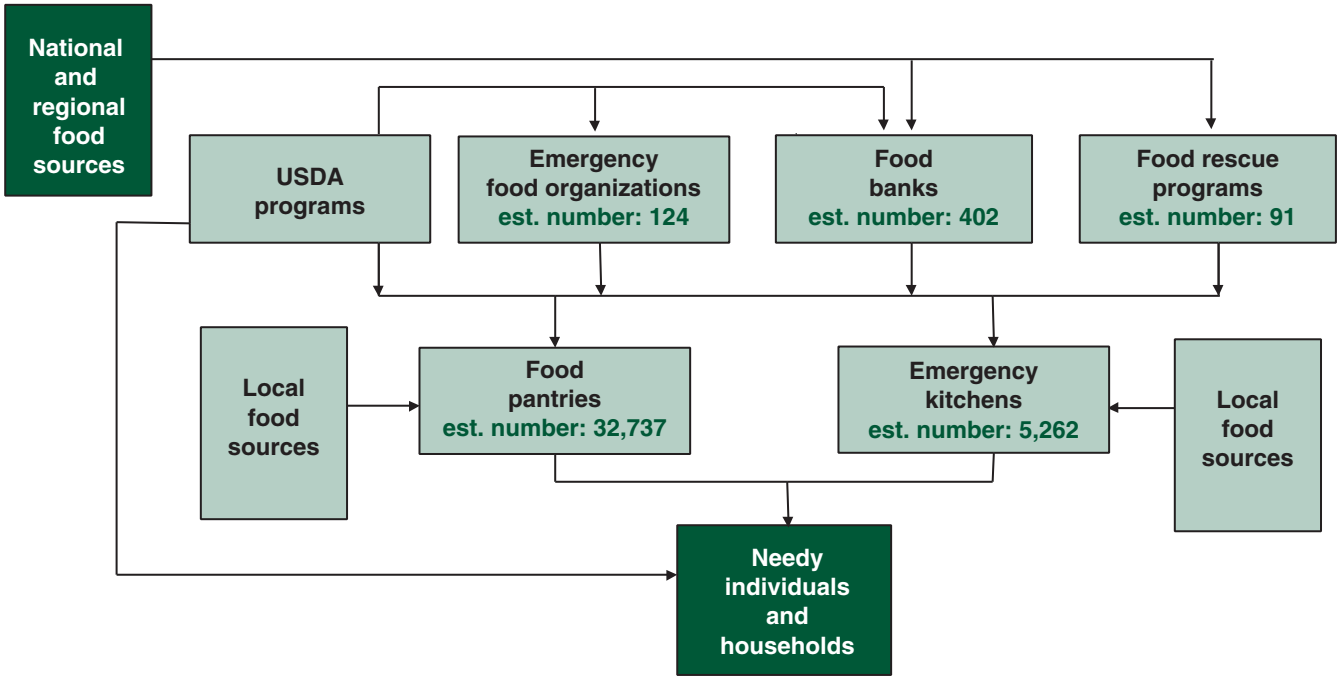
The EFAS helps ensure adequate nutrition for low-income Americans who may not have the resources to purchase sufficient food in stores and who may not be able to acquire sufficient food through government programs. Across the country, thousands of emergency kitchens and food pantries provide food assistance to people throughout the year. Regional and national organizations, such as food banks and the food banks' national-level representatives, help the provider agencies obtain food and other resources necessary to accomplish their mission. The EFAS, which functions largely in the private sector, provides meals and food supplies that, for many recipients, complement existing, government food assistance programs.

This report focuses on the operations of five types of EFAS agencies (fig. 1). Emergency kitchens and food pantries are the two major types of direct service providers in the system in terms of volume of food distributed. For purposes of the study, we defined emergency kitchens as organizations that provide low-income individuals with prepared food at little or no cost for consumption at the distribution site. In general, but not always, the food is cooked at the site and served heated. Food pantries are defined as organizations that provide food, usually uncooked, to low-income individuals for consumption away from the distribution site. (Further refinements of these definitions are provided in Ohls and Saleem-Ismael, 2001.)

The emergency kitchens and food pantries are supported by an extensive system of food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations, all of which obtain food and distribute it to the direct providers. Food banks focus on obtaining mostly non-

Figure 1

Emergency food assistance provider system



Notes: Emergency shelters are also considered part of the Emergency Food Assistance System but were not included in the present study. Food sources include donated food from manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and growers; food purchased at market prices from those same sources; field-gleaning and other donations of unsalable food; leftover food from service organizations, such as restaurants and schools; community donations; State programs; and other sources. For purposes of this study, the term "emergency food organization" was limited to "wholesale" organizations that distributed government commodities primarily to emergency kitchens and pantries. In some States, the term is used more broadly to include organizations that distribute commodities directly to households. This is discussed further in Ohls and Saleem-Ismail, 2001.

perishable food from national and regional sources, such as food manufacturers, while food rescue organizations focus on receiving perishable food from retailers, food service operations, and farmers. The emergency food organizations typically are local governments or private community action programs that distribute commodities made available under the TEFAP, which is operated by USDA.

There is another important set of EFAS providers—emergency shelters for the homeless—but they were not included in the current survey. They were recently studied by Burt et al. (1999).

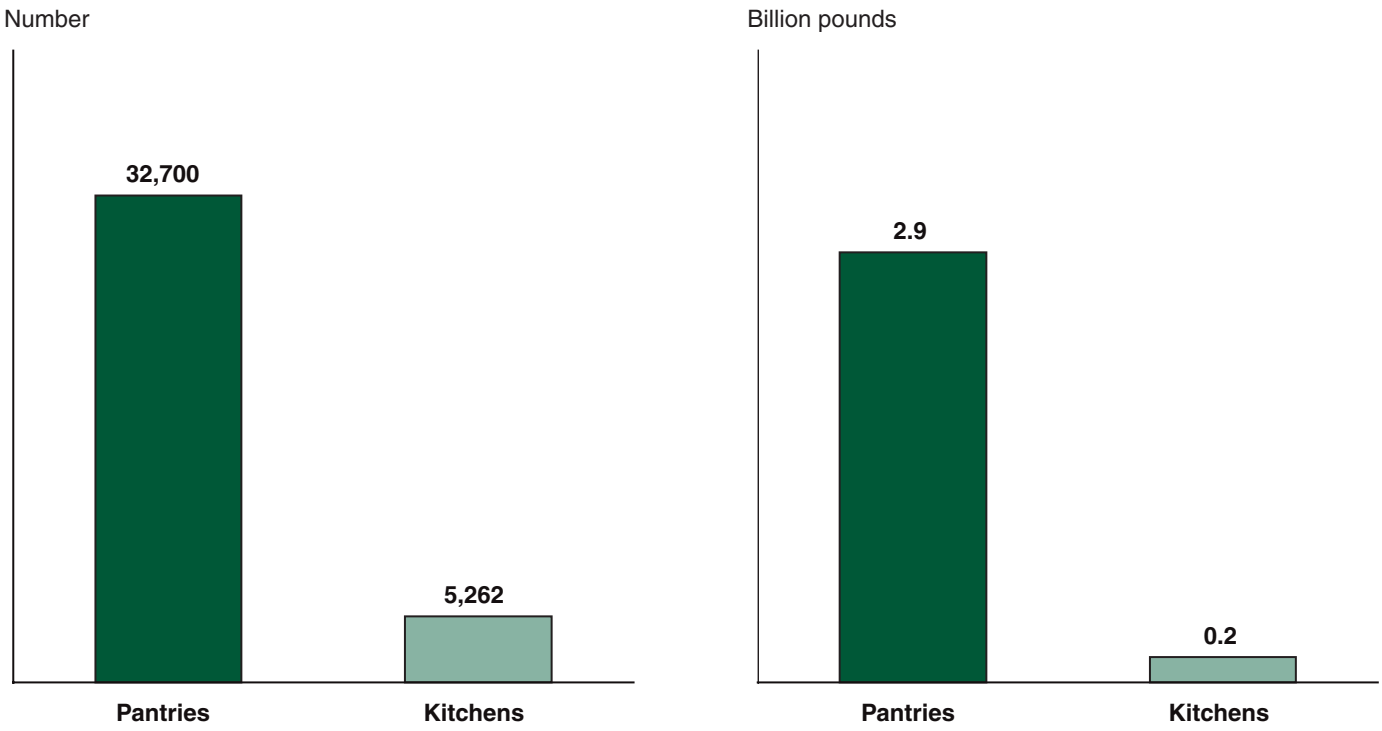
Overview of Findings

Following are key findings of the study:

- Approximately 5,300 emergency kitchens and 32,700 food pantries participate in the EFAS system. Overall, the kitchens provide more than 173 million meals per year. The pantries are estimated to distribute 2.9 billion pounds of food per year, which translates into roughly 6 million meals per day, or 2,200 million meals per year (fig. 2).
- Despite the substantial amounts of food distributed by the system, the EFAS remains much smaller in scale than the Federal programs designed to provide food assistance to the poor, the most important of which is the FSP. The size of the EFAS, in terms of meals provided, is approximately 11 percent of that of the major Federal nutrition assistance programs.
- The EFAS is mostly locally based, with a wide variety of program structures and innovative practices that meet differing local needs and that use differing local resources and local opportunities.
- Many direct service providers in the EFAS—65 percent of emergency kitchens and 67 percent of food pantries—are faith-based organizations, including churches, synagogues, and mosques (fig. 3).
- All components of the EFAS extensively use volunteers. Indeed, about half the kitchens and three-fourths of pantries function without any paid staff at all. More than 90 percent of both types of providers use at least some volunteer workers.
- During the 12 months before our survey, about 25 percent of kitchens and 33 percent of pantries turned away people who requested services. Most of the kitchens that had taken this step did so in response to disruptive behavior or because they believed the individuals in question had substance abuse problems. Most did not turn away people because of lack of food. Many of the pantries that turned away people did so because the people failed to meet the pantries' residency requirements or income guidelines. These requirements may reflect rules concerning who can receive Federal commodities.

Figure 2

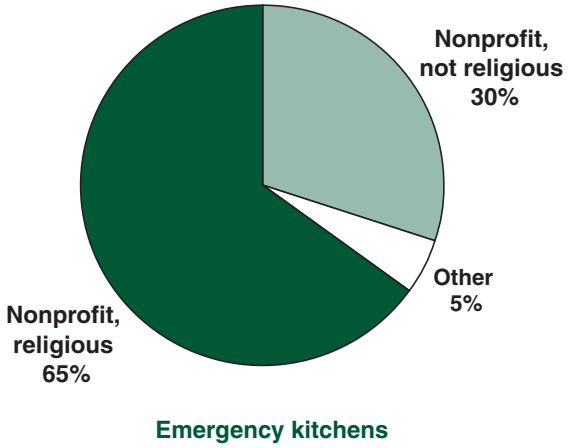
Number of emergency kitchens and pantries in EFAS and annual volume of food distributed



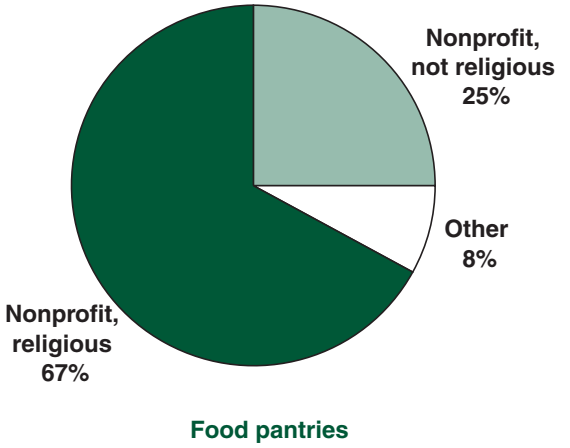
Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

Figure 3

Types of organizations providing EFAS services



Emergency kitchens



Food pantries

Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

- Although most kitchens and pantries do not turn away people because of lack of food, they do limit their food distribution. In about 40 percent of pantries, households are limited to receiving food once per month or less, and one-third of kitchens serve meals only one day per week.
- About one-fourth of both emergency kitchens and food pantries perceive that there are unmet needs for their services. More than half of food banks and food rescue organizations reported facing unmet needs.
- Compared with the geographic distribution of the low-income population, emergency kitchens are disproportionately available in metropolitan (versus nonmetropolitan) settings. For example, only 15 percent of kitchens are located in nonmetropolitan areas, whereas 21 percent of America's poor population live in these areas. Pantries are more prevalent in nonmetropolitan areas. Overall, the findings suggest possible issues of adequacy of coverage, particularly in nonmetropolitan areas.
- The study also found evidence that the EFAS may not provide consistent coverage across different parts of the day or days of the week. Data from the planned client survey, which will be conducted as part of the project, will be useful in examining this issue in additional detail.
- Approximately 89 percent of kitchens and 87 percent of pantries believed they could deal with a 5-percent increase in the need for their services, and about 30 percent thought that they could deal effectively with as much as a 20-percent increase in need.

Methods

The study was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research (MPR) under contract with USDA's Economic Research Service. The results presented in this report are based on a telephone survey of approximately 3,734 EFAS organizations—1,517 emergency kitchens, 1,617 pantries, 395 food banks, 88 food rescue organizations, and 117 emergency food organizations. The kitchens and pantries were clustered in a sample of 360 primary sampling units (PSUs), which are usually counties. These PSUs were selected with probabilities of selection proportional to the number of people in the PSUs who live in poverty. Some larger PSUs received multiple "hits" in the sampling; thus, the total number of discrete PSUs is 294.

The sample frame construction began with a compilation of the names of all the food banks in the country that could be identified through contacts with food banks and their national representatives, as well as through discussions with people in each PSU who were familiar with the EFAS. For food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations, we attempted to interview all of the relevant organizations that were identified. The sample frames of kitchens and pantries were constructed in two stages. First, we obtained provider listings from the food bank or food banks serving the relevant PSUs. Second, we supplemented the listings from the food banks by making extensive telephone calls to local informants—such as social service agencies, churches, and libraries—to ask for the names of all the EFAS providers known to them.

Interviews were conducted from MPR's interviewing facilities in Columbia, Maryland, and Princeton, New Jersey, using computer-assisted telephone-interviewing methods. Response rates were high, varying from 94 percent to 98 percent in the surveys of the five types of organizations.

Organizations in the EFAS

The following describes the characteristics and operations of emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, and food rescue organizations. Emergency food organizations will be discussed later.

Emergency Kitchens

Emergency kitchens serve an average of nearly half a million meals per day. Nearly two-thirds of emergency kitchens nationwide are operated by faith-based organizations—most often, churches. The other emergency kitchens tend to be private, nonprofit, nonreligious institutions. Most have been operating longer than 5 years, and many provide additional services, such as nutrition counseling, employment training, and substance abuse counseling. Many are located in ZIP code areas with high concentrations of minority groups—groups that tend to have relatively high rates of poverty and food insecurity.

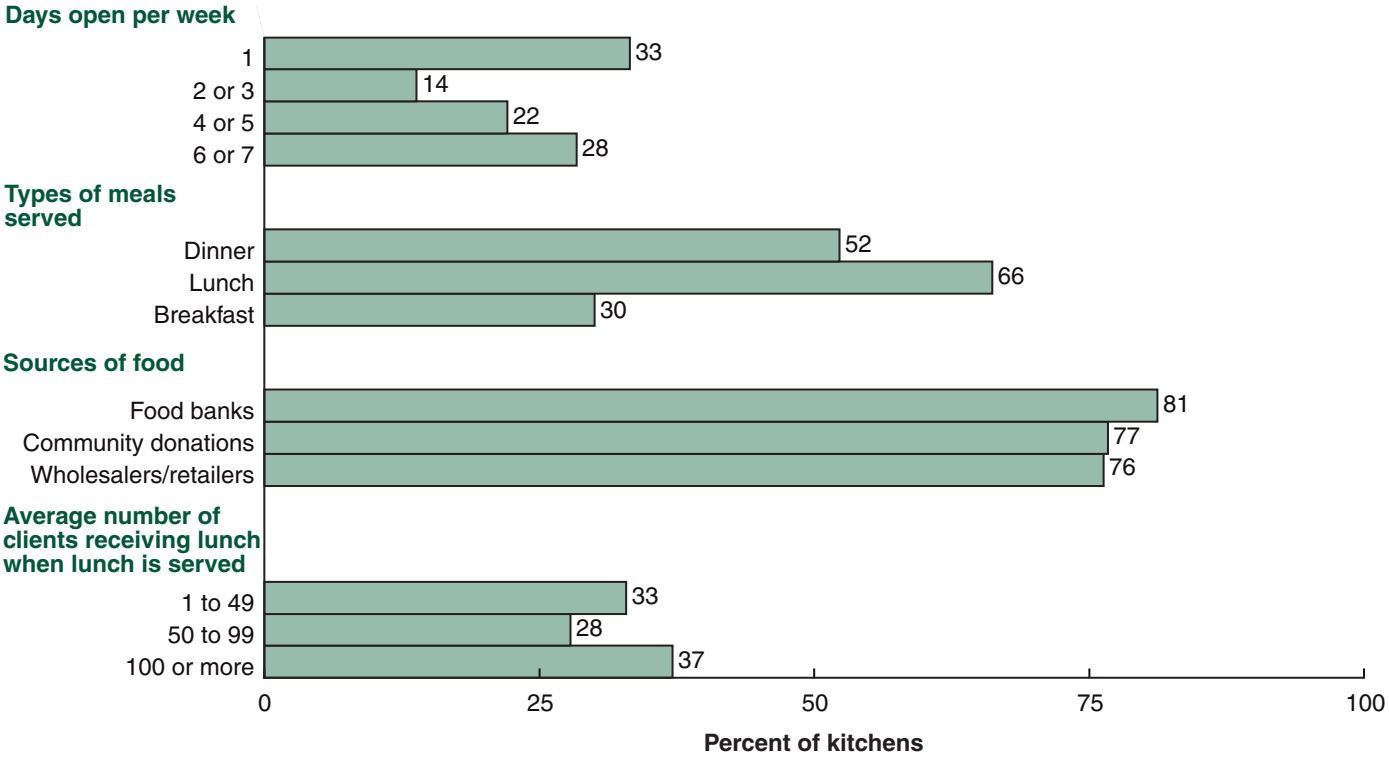
Approximately 47 percent of kitchens serve meals only on weekdays, and another 10 percent serve only on weekends. About 66 percent serve lunch, 30 percent serve breakfast, and 52 percent serve supper (fig. 4).

The average kitchen that serves lunch provides meals to about 70 people. Typically, 45 people are served at a breakfast, and 65 are served at a supper. Because a small number of kitchens are quite large (mostly in metropolitan areas), the average meal counts are significantly higher. For instance, the average lunch count is 112 people. Serving sizes at most kitchens are determined by the kitchen staff.

Kitchens rely on a number of different sources to obtain food. Important sources include food banks, community donations, and commercial retailers and wholesalers. (Kitchens obtain both purchased food and donated food from these last two sources.) Most kitchens rely heavily on funding from local sources,

Figure 4

Characteristics of emergency kitchens



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of missing data; others may add to more than 100 because multiple responses were provided.
Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey (2000), weighted tabulations.

including the United Way, donations, and fundraising activities.

Food Pantries

As with emergency kitchens, about two-thirds of food pantries are operated by faith-based organizations, while most of the rest are operated by private, nonprofit, secular groups. Many have been operating for more than 5 years, and many provide other services in addition to food distribution.

The typical food pantry distributes food 2 days a week. About 30 percent are open at least 5 days per week; approximately 16 percent are open less than once a week (fig. 5). On a day when it is open for food distribution, the typical food pantry remains open for about 3–4 hours.

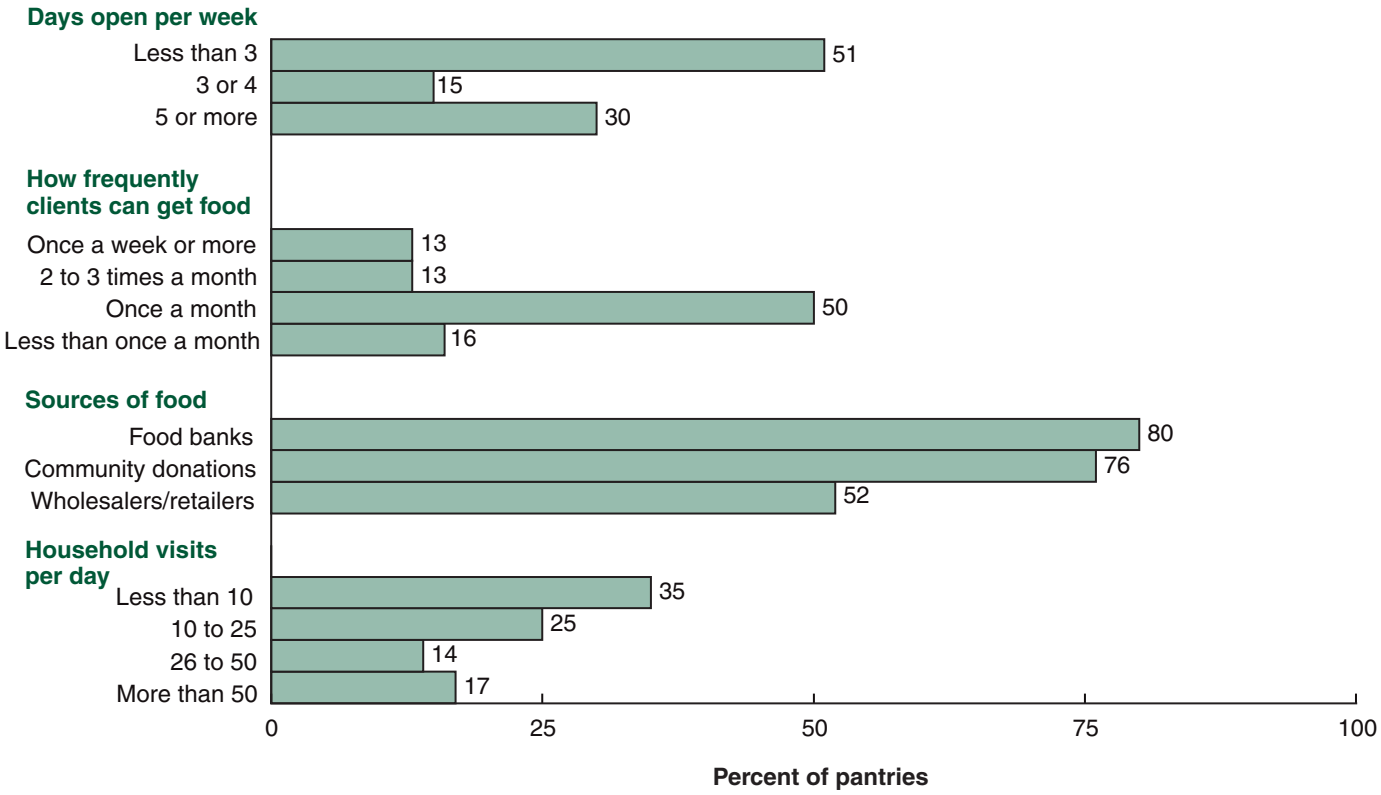
Typically, pantries allow households to obtain food once or twice a month. About one-third of pantries require that households live within their service areas, and about half have formal income guidelines. Many of these rules reflect Federal or State TEFAP requirements for the distribution of TEFAP commodities to households.

As with kitchens, food pantries obtain food from a broad range of sources. The three most frequently reported sources are (1) food banks, (2) community donations, and (3) wholesalers and retailers. In terms of staffing, most pantries—about 75 percent—rely entirely on volunteer staff.

Most food pantries are quite small. The median food pantry serves 15 households on a day when it is open; many serve fewer than 10 households per day. A few, however, serve upwards of 100 households a day. While some pantries allow households to select their own food, in most pantries, food is apportioned mainly by food pantry staff.

Figure 5

Characteristics of food pantries



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of missing data; others may add to more than 100 because multiple responses were provided.
Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey (2000).

Food Banks

Food banks are the "wholesalers" of the EFAS, obtaining food in bulk and distributing it to local service providers. In the current survey, we attempted to identify as many food banks as possible through contacts with America's Second Harvest, a national organization that includes most U.S. food banks, and through contacts with other sources knowledgeable about the EFAS. In all, we located 402 food banks, about 80 percent of which are affiliates of America's Second Harvest.

We attempted to interview each of them and completed interviews with 98 percent.

Typically, food banks are private, nonprofit, nonreligious organizations. More than 70 percent of the food banks interviewed have been operating longer than 5 years, and about 50 percent have been operating at least 10 years. In addition to distributing food, many offer technical assistance to the agencies they serve, particularly in the area of food handling and safety.

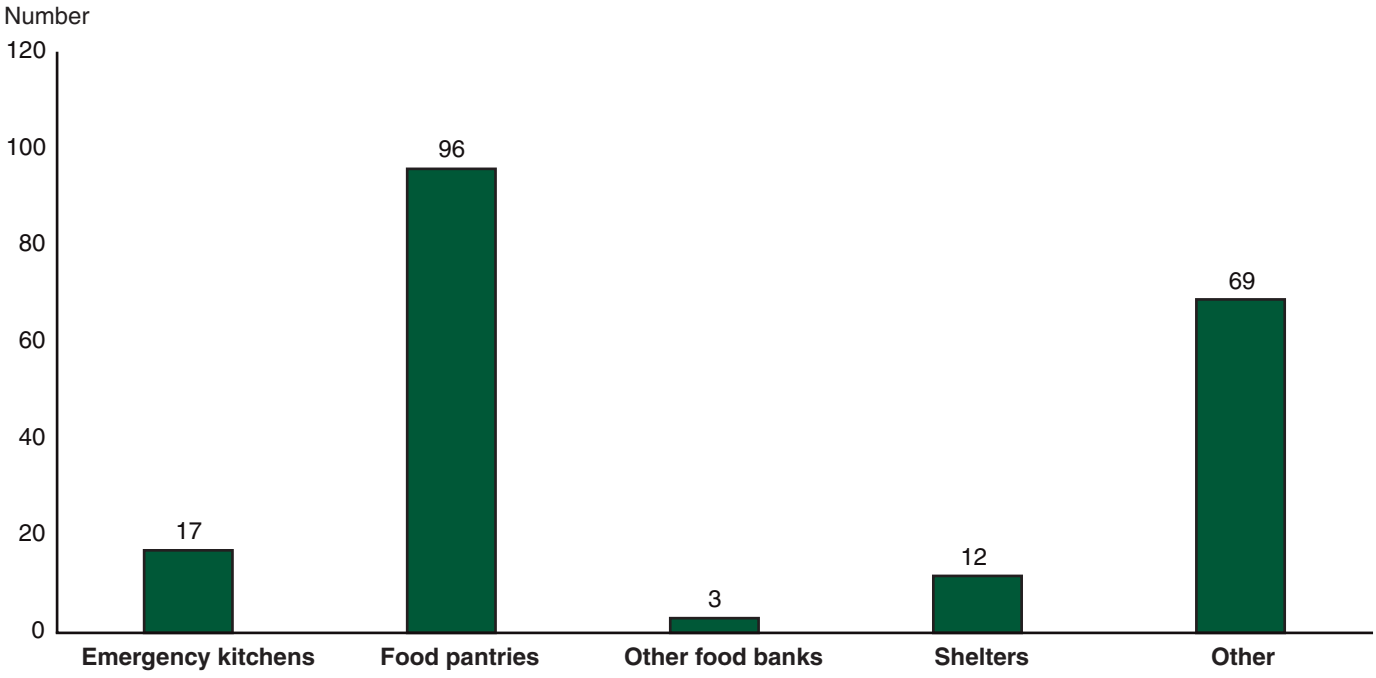
Food banks tend to serve multiple types of client agencies. On average, food banks serve 17 emergency kitchens, 96 food pantries, 3 other food banks, and 12 shelters, as well as other charitable provider agencies, such as hospitals and child care providers, which are not included in the current study (fig. 6).

Food banks typically have policies limiting the types of agencies they serve, with the most common restriction limiting assistance to nonprofit organizations with 501(c)(3) tax status. Many of the food banks have formal certification or approval processes to assess whether applicant agencies meet the food banks' criteria for service. About 43 percent of the food banks had turned away agencies that requested food during the previous year; however, only 8 percent of the food banks that turned away agencies reported doing so specifically because they had insufficient food resources.

Food banks obtain food from many different sources. The two main sources cited were (1) other food banks and the Second Harvest network, and (2) wholesalers and retailers. About one-third of the food banks reported that wholesalers and retailers were a primary source. (The food obtained from wholesalers and retailers included both food that could have been sold,

Figure 6

Number of organizations served by average food bank



Note: "Other" includes various charitable organizations that serve food, including daycare centers, senior centers, and hospitals.
Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

and "salvage" food considered safe and wholesome but not salable, due to mislabeled cans or similar problems.) Most food banks also obtain commodities through USDA programs, but this food source usually was not a primary one. These programs are discussed in relation to the EFAS in a later section.

Food Rescue Organizations

Like food banks, food rescue organizations operate at a "wholesale" level, obtaining food in substantial quantities, then distributing it to direct provider organizations, including emergency kitchens and food pantries. Unlike food banks, however, food rescue organizations focus on obtaining and providing perishable food. Given this focus, speed of distribution is essential to the operations of these organizations; therefore, these organizations typically operate on a smaller scale than food banks, distributing across more limited areas.

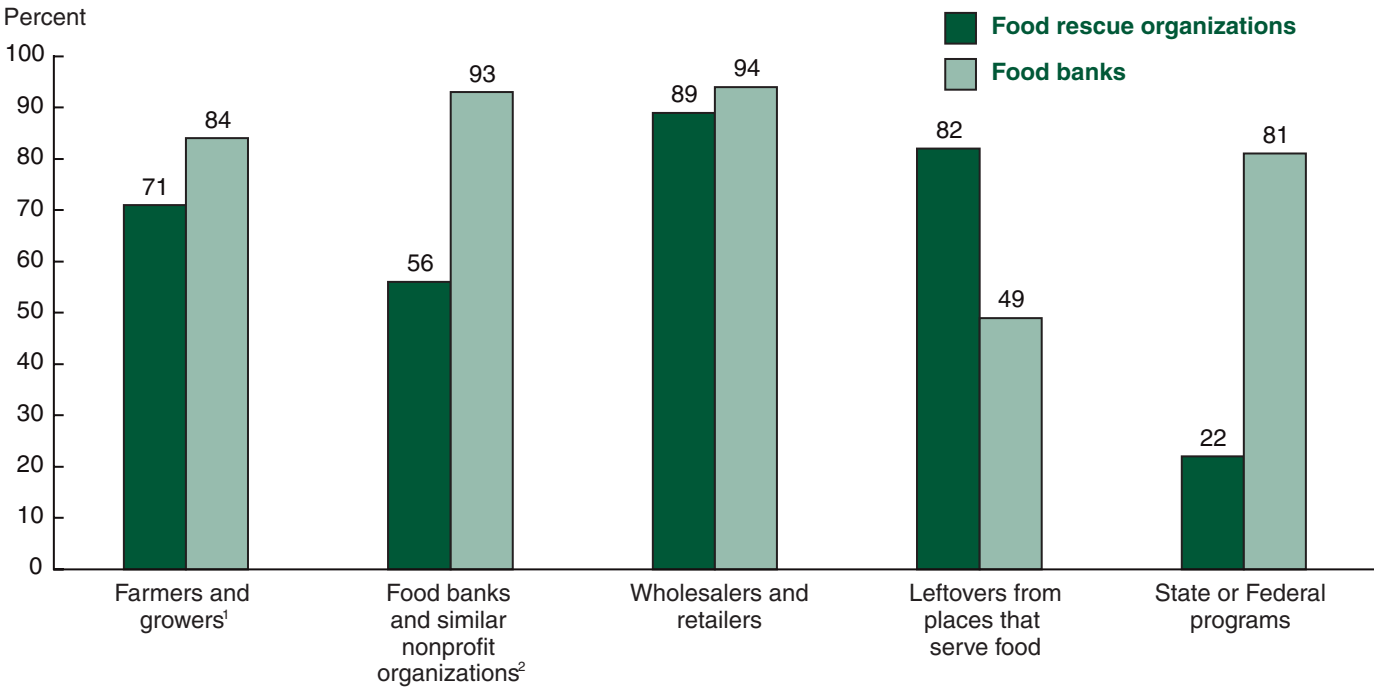
Most food rescue organizations are private, nonprofit entities. Like food banks, but unlike emergency kitchens and food pantries, most food rescue organizations are not affiliated with a religious group. Most have been operating longer than 5 years. Generally, they serve smaller numbers of provider organizations than do food banks. Typically, they serve fewer than 25 food pantries and fewer than 10 emergency kitchens. Many serve other types of organizations, including food banks and shelters.

As might be expected, given their mission, food rescue organizations tend to draw on a somewhat different profile of food sources than do food banks (fig. 7). About 82 percent indicated that they obtained leftovers from places that serve food, and 71 percent obtained food from farmers and growers.

Approximately three-fourths of food rescue organizations have paid employees, and 92 percent make use of volunteer workers. Like the other EFAS organizations described thus far, food rescue organizations rely heavily on local funding from donations and other fundraising activities.

Figure 7

Sources of food used by food rescue organizations and food banks



[1] Includes food purchased at retail prices, gleaned, left over, and salvaged.
[2] Includes those mentioning America's Second Harvest.
Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

Commodity Programs and the EFAS

The main direct connection that the Federal Government has with the EFAS is through its provision of commodities to the system through two USDA programs: TEFAP and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Our discussion focuses on the TEFAP, which is the larger of the two and is more closely linked to the EFAS. The TEFAP distributed 422 million pounds of commodities in 2000 (fig. 8). Most of this food was distributed through the EFAS, and the 422 million pounds represents about 14 percent of all EFAS food.

A majority of EFAS agencies distribute USDA commodities under TEFAP. This includes 55 percent of emergency kitchens, 52 percent of food pantries, and 84 percent of food banks.

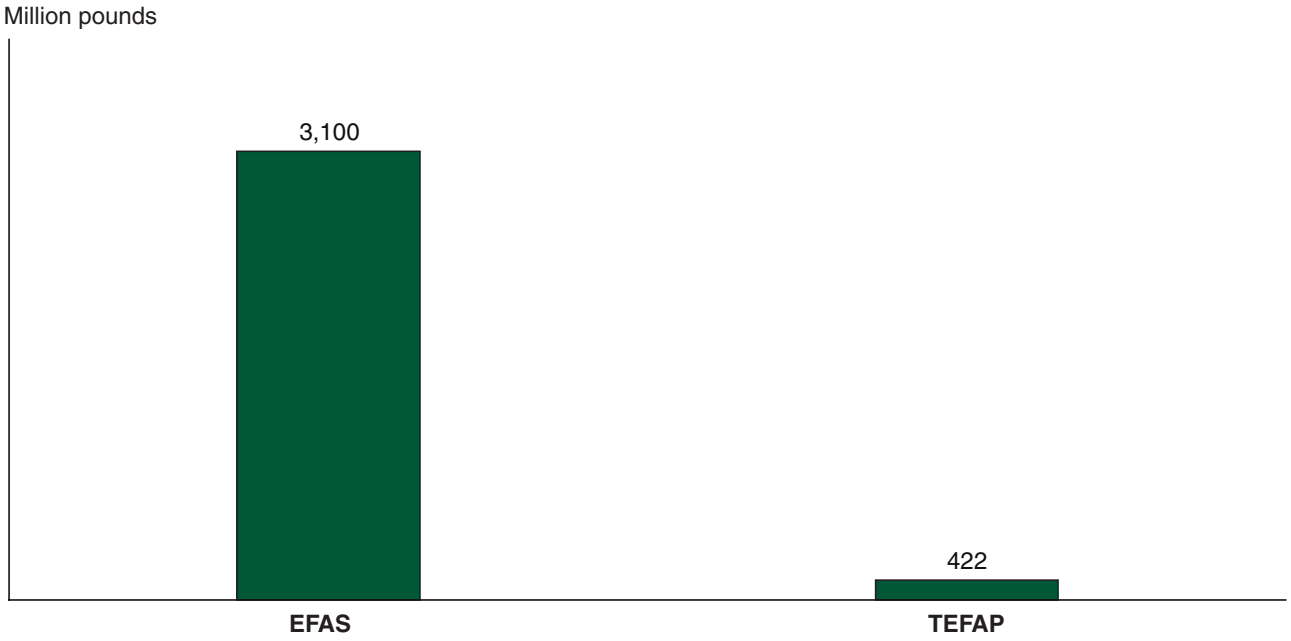
In addition, one type of EFAS organization, emergency food organizations (EFOs), focuses its EFAS activities mainly on the distribution of TEFAP commodities. When USDA commodities become available, emergency food organizations sometimes serve as conduits for those commodities from the TEFAP State offices to local providers. The presence of EFOs tends to vary by State, partly because the States are given flexibility in how TEFAP commodities are distributed. Some States use EFOs as a principal distribution mechanism for TEFAP commodities; other States either distribute TEFAP commodities mainly through food banks or distribute them directly to needy individuals.

Most EFOs exist primarily for other, non-EFAS, purposes, such as to provide community services, and only participate in the EFAS from time to time, when TEFAP commodities become available. Approximately one-third of EFOs are run by government entities; most of the rest are private, nonprofit organizations. Most—80 percent—have been operating longer than 5 years. They tend to be more limited in scope in their EFAS activities than food banks, with 80 percent serving fewer than 25 pantries and 76 percent serving 5 or fewer kitchens.

Most EFOs—89 percent—have paid employees; 74 percent employ volunteer staff. EFOs reported TEFAP administrative funds and other government sources as their main sources of funding for their food distribution work.

Figure 8

Estimated food distribution by the EFAS and TEFAP, 2000



Sources: EFAS total: National Emergency Food System Survey, 2000; TEFAP total: R. De Lorenzo, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, August 2001.

Recent Changes in the Use of EFAS Services and Possible Unmet Demand

Welfare rolls and the official U.S. poverty rate have declined substantially in recent years. For instance, between 1997 and 2000, the number of people receiving welfare assistance declined from 11 million to 6 million, while the U.S poverty rate decreased from 13.3 to 11.8 percent. These changes are widely attributed to welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996 and to the strong U.S. economy. Other factors may also be at work.

We examined changes in the use of EFAS services during these years to see if they mirrored changes in poverty and welfare rates. The survey asked providers to estimate whether (and how much) use of their services had changed between 1997 and 2000. Note that our information is based on provider *estimates*, not on direct reference to agency records, because many EFAS providers, particularly the smaller ones, do not maintain records in consistent formats over time. Also, of necessity, these data include only organizations that were operating in at least 1997 and were still operating at the time of the survey.

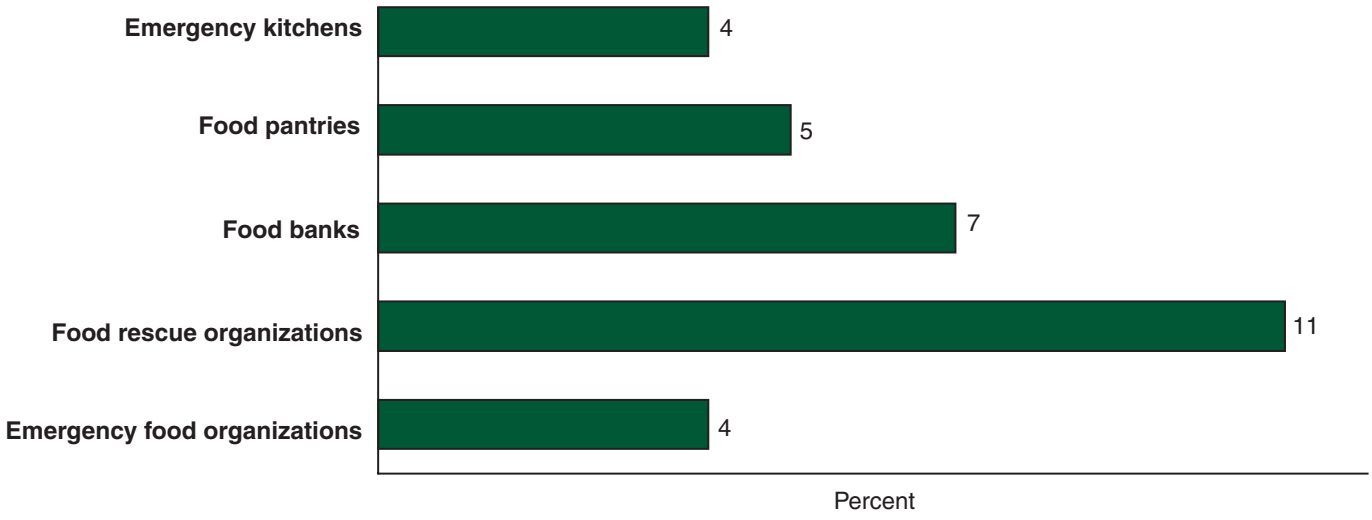
All the organizations studied reported, on average, that the use of their services had gone up, with the annual increases ranging from 4 percent per year for emergency food organizations to 11 percent for food rescue organizations (fig. 9). The increases for kitchens and pantries were 4 and 5 percent, respectively. Thus, the data suggest that use of the EFAS was rising considerably at a time when the economy was strong and welfare rolls were declining.

Recent studies by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and recent food bank distribution data from America's Second Harvest administrative records are consistent with the finding that use of EFAS services has been rising, and the data from these sources imply higher rates of growth than those just reported. However, analysis of yearly data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, on the proportion of households using EFAS facilities does not show a clear, consistent pattern.

An examination of factors associated with larger or smaller changes in use, in terms of characteristics of the providers or their locations, failed to show clear patterns. The reason for the increase in EFAS use during a time of widespread prosperity is not clear.

Figure 9

Annual percentage increase in use of EFAS services, as reported by EFAS agencies, 1997-2000



Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

EFAS Capacity To Meet Demand

A critical question for assessing the overall success of the EFAS is: Does the EFAS have adequate capacity to meet the need for its services? The evidence from the study about this question is mixed. Many, perhaps most, EFAS agencies believe that they are currently able to meet the need for their services. The data also suggest, however, that some EFAS agencies do not have the staff and supplies necessary to keep up with demand. Relevant evidence is highlighted here.

Many direct EFAS service providers—about three-quarters of kitchens and two-thirds of pantries—indicated that they did *not* have to turn away clients in need during the previous year (fig. 10). Further, most kitchens that had turned away clients in need cited drug or behavioral problems as the reason rather than lack of capacity. Lack of food was seldom mentioned as the reason. Pantries frequently mentioned that potential clients had not met income or residence guidelines as reasons for turning clients away; as with kitchens, most had not turned away clients because of lack of food.

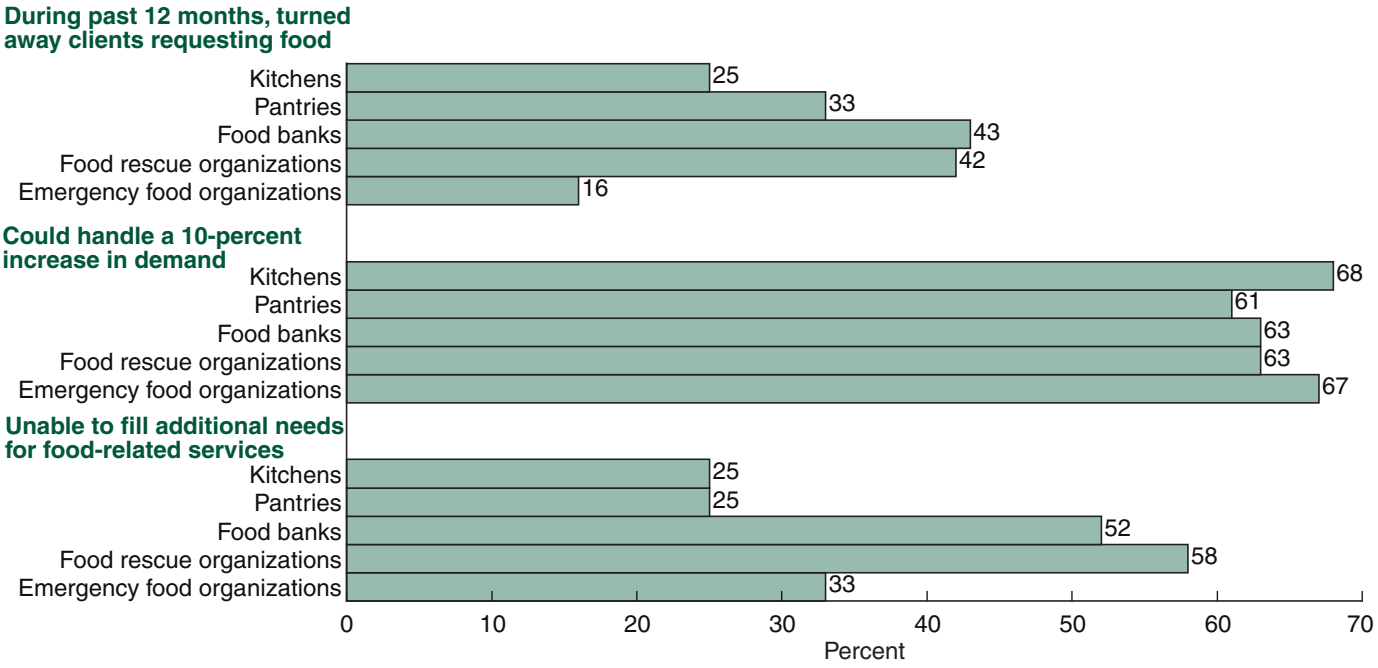
About 21 percent of kitchens and 39 percent of pantries indicated that they had to limit food distribution because of lack of food during the previous 12 months. Also, more than 60 percent of both pantries and kitchens indicated that they believed they would be able to deal adequately with at least a 10-percent increase in demand for their services (and, in many instances, with more than a 10-percent increase). This response suggests that they believe they have the resources they need to cope adequately with their current level of demand.

However, the same statistics just cited also suggest that many providers believe they *lack* the resources to fully satisfy current demand. For each variable discussed, usually 10-40 percent of respondents indicated problems in meeting the needs of everyone requesting services.

When asked directly if they where meeting the need for their services, about 25 percent each of kitchens and pantries, together with 52 percent of food banks, indicated that they perceived more need for their services than they could fulfill. Further, most of the agencies providing this response indicated that they would

Figure 10

Possible indicators of unmet needs



Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey, 2000.

like to *both* increase services for existing clients *and* extend existing services to new groups of clients.

Overall, the picture that emerges is one in which most EFAS providers perceive themselves as coping adequately with the immediate needs for their services. Others either are not able to meet immediate needs or perceive other services that they could offer to help their clientele.

Furthermore, the food banks, with their somewhat broader perspective (as compared with local kitchens and pantries), were more likely than kitchens and pantries to indicate that they perceived unmet needs for their services.

Roles of the EFAS and the Federal Government in Providing Nutrition Assistance

Some observers have been puzzled by the seeming redundancy of the EFAS and the major government nutrition assistance programs. Are both private and the public programs needed? If so, what roles do they play?

Our analysis suggests that the EFAS may serve a number of functions to complement the available public programs. First, the EFAS supplies additional help to people who receive government food assistance but who find government benefits insufficient to meet all of their needs. Second, the EFAS provides assistance to some people who may have immediate needs for food but are unable to meet the administrative or substantive eligibility requirements of government programs. Third, the availability of the EFAS provides a private option to people who, because of fear of stigma or other reasons, are reluctant to accept government help.

However, evidence suggests that a continuing major role for the Federal sector in nutrition assistance is essential for accomplishing America's nutrition assistance goals. Perhaps the most important evidence of this is the sheer relative size of government programs compared with the EFAS. Government programs currently contribute nearly 90 percent of the combined public and private food assistance in this country. It is extremely unlikely that, in the absence of Federal programs, the EFAS could obtain the resources to fill this gap. Another important issue is entitlement. Certain government programs—most important, the Food Stamp Program—provide a *legal entitlement* to assistance, thus furthering the goal of ensuring that all people in the United States have adequate food. It is not clear that the EFAS, which relies on the decentralized decisionmaking of many independent organizations, can ensure comparable entitlement and full coverage of the needy population. Even with an expanded EFAS, coverage gaps could remain, and there would be no obvious mechanism to ensure that they would be filled.

These arguments suggest that the EFAS and the public sector may work in tandem to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide by itself. The client survey planned for the second phase of the current project will provide significant additional information with which to explore these connections by examining patterns of multiple benefit use and the factors that draw clients to the EFAS.

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