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ISSUES

IN FOOD ASSISTANCE

The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Client Survey

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Issue: Food pantries and emergency kitchens play an important role in the nutrition safety net for America's low-income and needy populations. These organizations are part of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS), a network run largely by private organizations with some Federal Government support. To better understand the EFAS and its interactions with Federal food assistance programs, the Economic Research Service (ERS) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct a national study of food pantries and emergency kitchens.

One of the study's reports and a companion executive summary present findings from the 2001 EFAS Client Survey. The survey sampled clients who received emergency food assistance from selected food pantries and emergency kitchens that participated in the 2000 EFAS Provider Survey (Briefel et al., 2003a; Briefel et al., 2003b).

Background: Food pantries and emergency kitchens offer community-based food assistance to needy, low-income households and individuals. Food pantries are distribution centers that provide groceries and other basic necessities that clients use in their homes or at locations away from distribution sites. Emergency kitchens supply meals for onsite consumption. Food pantries and emergency kitchens often receive food from food banks or food rescue organizations, which function as wholesalers in the EFAS. Food banks typically collect and distribute nonperishable food from regional and national sources, while food rescue organizations collect and distribute perishable food from restaurants, caterers, and other foodservice providers.

The EFAS interacts closely with USDA food assistance programs. Food pantries and emergency kitchens provide food assistance to many of the same populations targeted by Federal food assistance programs, and also serve as distribution outlets for USDA commodities. Through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), emergency food providers receive USDA commodities that they distribute to low-income households or use to provide meals for needy people. Most TEFAP food is distributed through the EFAS, and TEFAP commodities account for about 14 percent of all EFAS food (Ohls et al., 2002).

Findings: The EFAS Client Survey provides information on the demographic characteristics of food pantry and emergency kitchen users, their experiences with the use of private food assistance, and their participation in Federal food assistance programs. The study finds that, while emergency food providers serve a diverse clientele, the majority of their clients live in food-insecure households, as described below:²

- About 4.3 million different households, including 8.0 million adults and 4.5 million children, received food from pantries during a typical month in 2001. About 1.1 million people (856,000 adults and 275,000 children) received meals from emergency kitchens during the same timeframe.
- Among pantry-client households, 45 percent include children under 18, 30 percent include one or more adults (but no seniors or children), and 25 percent include seniors and no children; 8 percent are homeless. Among kitchen-client households, 20 percent include

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²Food insecurity refers to a limited or uncertain availability or ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods because of financial constraints. Food pantry and emergency kitchen users reported on a number of experiences that indicated that their household is having difficulty meeting its food needs. This information is used to categorize households as food secure, food insecure, or food insecure with hunger.

children, 63 percent include adults and no children, mostly men (but no seniors), and 17 percent include seniors and no children; 36 percent are homeless.

- About three-fourths of EFAS households are food insecure; almost half are food insecure with hunger. Two in five kitchen-client households and one in four pantry households said 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.

The clients of emergency food providers generally expressed satisfaction with their experiences at emergency food providers. For example,

- About 9 out of 10 EFAS clients are satisfied with the amount and variety of food they receive from EFAS providers. About 2 out of 10 pantry clients and 3 out of 10 kitchen clients said they sometimes were unable to receive food when they needed it; transportation problems are the most common contributing factor.
- One in three kitchen clients and one in seven pantry clients are sometimes asked to participate in prayers or other religious activities.³ About 9 out of 10 said they are comfortable being asked to participate in these faith-based activities.

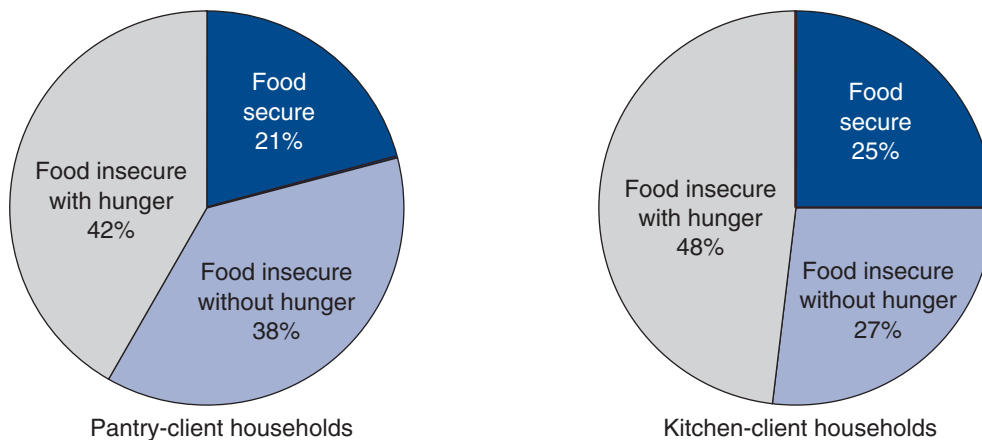
The survey collected extensive information about respondents' eligibility for and use of Federal food assistance programs. The key findings related to program participation are:

³The survey question does not ask whether receipt of food assistance is conditional on participation in prayers or religious activities.

- Two-thirds of pantry-client households (69 percent) and nearly half of kitchen-client households (45 percent) combine private food assistance with use of public food assistance programs.
- Almost 90 percent of client households were calculated to be eligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program, the largest USDA food assistance program. About half of eligible client households received food stamps in the year prior to the interview.
- Three-fifths of eligible pantry clients and half of eligible kitchen clients receive WIC. The rate of participation among eligible households is highest in the National School Lunch Program. Over 80 percent of eligible client households contain a child who receives free or reduced-price lunch.
- About 43 percent of pantry-client households and 52 percent of kitchen-client households that combine private and public food assistance programs are food insecure with hunger. Food insecurity with hunger is higher among client households that either participate in the Food Stamp Program or are eligible to participate (44 percent of pantry- and about 50 percent of kitchen-client households) compared with client households ineligible to receive food stamps (26 percent of pantry- and 32 percent of kitchen-client households, respectively).

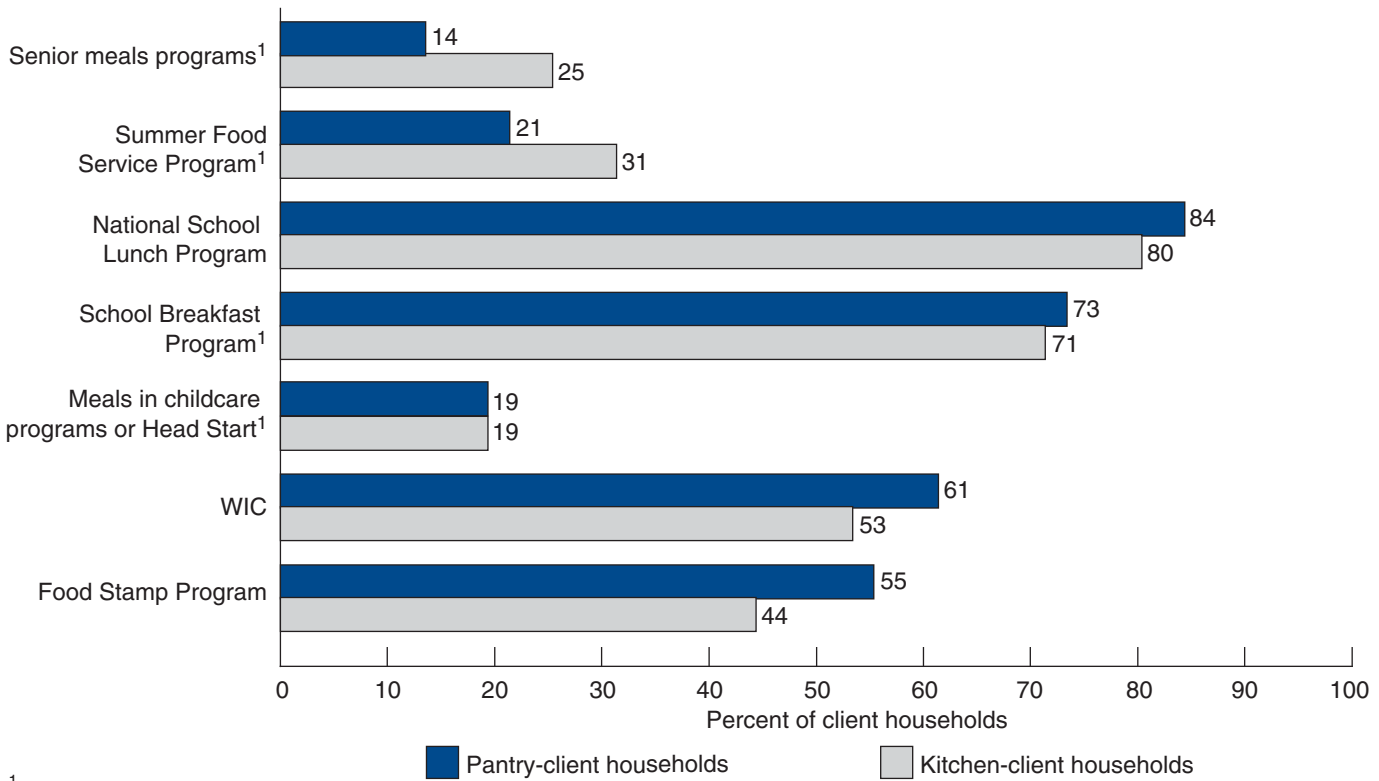
Conclusions: The EFAS serves the needs of large numbers of diverse groups in the U.S. low-income population—single-parent families, families with children, the homeless, the unemployed, the working poor, and seniors. EFAS clients experience more severe hardships in comparison with the general low-income population in the United

EFAS clients' food security status



Note: Categories do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Participation in public food assistance programs (among eligible households)



States—they report more health problems and material hardships and experience higher rates of homelessness and food insecurity with hunger. The study finds that many pantry and kitchen clients participate in Federal food assistance programs. However, almost half of pantry and kitchen clients eligible to receive food stamps do not receive them, which suggests that further attention to the factors that influence their use of Federal food assistance programs is warranted. The EFAS plays an important role in providing food assistance, and more attention to the use of Federal food assistance among this population can help to ensure that the EFAS and Federal food assistance programs can work together to most effectively reach those in need of food assistance.

Information Sources:

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