



Many Families Turn to Food Pantries for Help

by Sheila R. Zedlewski and Sandi Nelson

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In 2002, over 4 million nonelderly low-income families said they had used a food pantry at least once during the past 12 months. The majority of these families had children, and most included adults who had worked during the past year. Nearly half the families that turned to a food pantry also had some help from the federal Food Stamp program in the past year. The data indicate that emergency food assistance programs, run largely by private organizations, play an important role in supplementing earnings and government assistance for many families.

The Food Pantry Safety Net

Food pantries distribute food for use in families' homes and are distinct from emergency kitchens (soup kitchens) that provide prepared food to eat at the site. Most of the food distributed by food pantries comes from local donations from private sources (individuals or food companies), but the federal government supplements these resources through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Recently the government estimated that TEFAP provided about 12 percent of all food distributed at pantries and soup kitchens.¹ Food pantries rely heavily on volunteers, and the majority are affiliated with faith-based organizations.

The 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) asked families whether they had gotten emergency food from a church, food pantry, or food bank during the past 12 months. The question was asked of low-income families (families that reported income below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds in the prior year) and was designed to mirror one asked by the Census Bureau in its Current Population Survey (CPS). Responses probably underestimate actual use of food pantries because some families that turn to pantries on a regular basis may not consider it "emergency use" and may give a negative response. A recent, government-sponsored survey of clients at food pantries estimated even higher use than shown in the CPS (Briefel et al. 2003).² The NSAF provides a representative

sample of nonelderly families in the United States in 2002 and, therefore, excludes use of food pantries by senior citizens.

Emergency Food Reaches a Broad Range of Families

The vast majority of families that turn to food pantries for emergency help are working or have children. Seven in ten nonelderly families that used food pantries had earned income in the past year, and over half had children under age 18 (figure 1). Nearly half the families

that turned to food pantries consisted of working parents with children. They represented 16.4 percent of the 11.5 million low-income families with children and earned income in 2002. Only 22.5 percent of nonelderly families that reported using food pantries had no children or employment.

Food pantries also reach families across a fairly broad spectrum of incomes (figure 2). More than half the low-income families that used food pantries had incomes below the federal poverty thresholds in the prior year: 23.5 percent had incomes below 50 percent and 30.1 percent had incomes between 50 and 100 percent, representing about 20 percent of all families in these income groups. Almost three in ten of the families that used food pantries in the past 12 months had incomes between 100 and 150 percent, and nearly two in ten had incomes between 150 and 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds, representing 14.7

and 10.5 percent, respectively, of all families in these income categories.

The results also indicate that low-income families often turn to multiple sources for help in meeting their families' needs. A large share (46.2 percent) of low-income families that used food pantries also reported some use of the federal Food Stamp program in the prior year.³ While food stamps are generally available only for families with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty thresholds, eligibility is based on current monthly income, so families with fluctuating income can qualify during some months and not others.

DATA AT A GLANCE

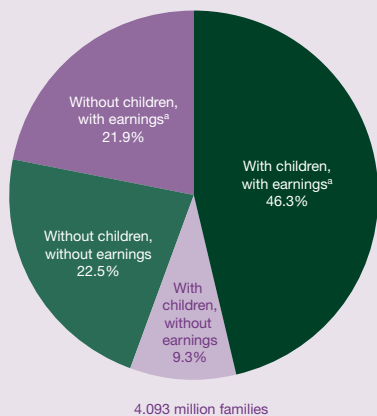
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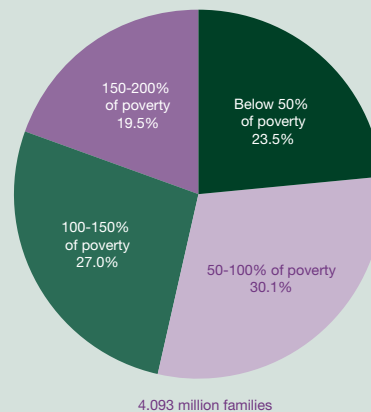


Figure 1. Nonelderly Low-Income Families That Used a Food Pantry in the Past 12 Months, by Earnings and Presence of Children



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families
 Note: Families include all persons related by blood, marriage, adoption, or partnership and single adults living alone.
^a "With earnings" indicates that family had some income from earnings in past year.

Figure 2. Nonelderly Families That Used a Food Pantry in the Past 12 Months, by 2001 Income Relative to Poverty Thresholds



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families
 Notes: Families include all persons related by blood, marriage, adoption, or partnership and single adults living alone. The NSAF does not measure food pantry use among families with incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds.

Discussion

Food pantries help to reduce hunger and hardship in the United States. Many families, including working families with children, use these local resources to supplement their income. Even families earning a poverty-level income (about \$1,250 per month for a family of three) can be stretched when they need to cover housing, health, child care, and food costs. Also, some families' incomes fluctuate during the year, and they need temporary help to get by.

Local private sector charities and national organizations such as Second Harvest, which serves as a major broker between food companies and local pantries, are a critical part of the social safety net. In an ideal world, all families would earn enough to provide for their basic needs throughout the year, but current reality falls far short of this ideal.

References

Briefel, Ronette, Jonathan Jacobson, Nancy Clusen, Teresa Zavitsky, Miki Satake, Brittany Dawson, and Rhoda Cohen. 2003. *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings from the Client Survey*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. 2002. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2001*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Research Report Number 29.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Nord, Andrews, and Carlson (2002) for a comprehensive description of these and other nutrition resources.
- ² The NSAF shows somewhat higher use of food pantries than the 2001 CPS (Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2002). However, the NSAF data reflect a later time period when the economy was weaker, and they represent the total number of families (including all members related by blood, marriage, partnership, and adoption), which exceeds the number of CPS households (including all persons living at a single address regardless of relationship). CPS also restricts questions about food pantry use to families with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty thresholds, whereas the NSAF asked the question of families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty thresholds.
- ³ Most NSAF families were interviewed between March and October 2002. They were asked about emergency food assistance use during the past 12 months, but their income, earnings, and food stamp use refer to last year (2001). Thus, the results do not indicate simultaneous use or receipt of help but instead provide indicators of these relationships.

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SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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