

The Food Safety Net After Welfare Reform: Use of Private and Public Food Assistance in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

This study uses a unique database of clients of private food providers in the Kansas City metropolitan area to document the use of private food assistance from January 1998 to May 2001. We show that, while the use of private food assistance is widespread in the Kansas City area, the frequency of food pantry use is low compared to food stamp use. One advantage of this database is that private food providers actually document the use of their services, so that it provides more reliable information about frequency and timing of food pantry use than most other studies, which must rely on providers' ability to recall patterns of use over time.

We merge the data on clients of private food providers with data from Food Stamp Program administrative records, which allows us to compare use of the two types of food assistance, and examine the interactions between use of the two systems. While it was rare for recipients to receive both services in any given month, many of the same households received both types of food assistance at some time between 1998 and 2001. Almost 60 percent of food pantry recipients also received food stamps at some time during that period. However, this means that roughly 40% of food pantry client households did not receive food stamps during this time period, although their reported incomes suggest that they were eligible. A smaller percent of food stamp households relied on food pantries. Between 1998 and 2001, just over one-third visited a pantry at least once.

With regard to timing of services, we find that households that access both systems primarily receive food stamps and food pantry assistance at the same time, or within a few months. This implies that these households are not substituting one form of assistance for the other, but rather accessing multiple types of assistance when necessary.

Introduction

Federal food assistance programs, including food stamps, provided almost \$38 billion in benefits to low-income households in 2002 (Rosso 2003). At the same time, many households turned to a private food assistance provider in their community during times of need. A recent study estimated that there are almost 33,000 food pantries and over 5,000 emergency kitchens in the United States. (Ohls, et al, 2002) Food pantries provided an estimated 3.4 billion pounds of food in 2000, while emergency kitchens (often referred to as soup kitchens) provided an estimated 173 million meals.

In 1996, Congress passed legislation, commonly known as welfare reform that redesigned the cash welfare system. The legislation gave States more flexibility in the design of their welfare programs, but also imposed work requirements on cash welfare recipients, and time limits on the receipt of Federal cash assistance. These changes may have affected participation in the Food Stamp Program. In addition, the welfare reform legislation restricted the eligibility of some groups to receive food stamps.

Both cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads have declined since the mid-1990s. The number of people using food stamps decreased by 37 percent between 1994 and 2000, from an average of 27.5 million people per month in 1994 to 17.2 million people per month in 2000 (Cunningham 2002). The number of Food Stamp Program participants has increased since 2000, to an average of 19.1 million per month in 2002 (Cunningham 2003). A strong economy certainly contributed to much of the 1994-2000 decline, but many observers have expressed concern that some of those who have left the caseloads have not achieved self-sufficiency. These households may have instead come to depend on private food providers for assistance in meeting their food needs. Increased

use of private food assistance in the midst of falling cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads may signal a shift to greater reliance on private versus public sources of assistance. Information on the interactions between the use of food stamps and the use of private food, and how their use has changed over time, can suggest ways to ensure that the Federal food assistance programs can provide a strong food safety net, and work most effectively with private food assistance efforts.

Although use of food stamps is relatively well documented¹, little information exists regarding the private side of the food safety net. Information is particularly scarce regarding longitudinal use, as well as the relationship between food pantry and food stamp use. This study is unique in that it uses longitudinal data on the use of both public and private food assistance. We merge data on use of food stamps, from Food Stamp Program administrative caseload data, with data from a unique database on the use of food pantries, to examine patterns of usage from 1998-2001. Our findings are specific to three counties in Missouri (Jackson, Clay and Platte), which comprise the bulk of the Missouri side of the Kansas City metropolitan area.

In this paper we ask the following questions:

- 1) How do trends in the use of food pantries compare to trends in food stamp use? How does the frequency of receipt compare between food pantry households and food stamp households?
- 2) How much overlap is there between receipt of private and public food assistance?

¹ Rosso (2003) is the most recent of a series of annual reports, commissioned by USDA, that describe food stamp program participant households. In addition, a few studies, including Ohls and Beebout (1993) and Rossi (1998), have examined the history and design of the program.

- 3) How is the timing of receipt of one form of food assistance related to receipt of the other form?

We find the patterns of public and private assistance receipt are markedly different. Many private assistance users received help very infrequently; food stamp recipients tended to receive benefits for longer periods of time. There was, however, a relatively high degree of overlap between the two systems. At any given time, about one-third of private assistance users were also relying on food stamps. Over a three and one half year time period, fewer than sixty percent of all private assistance users received food stamps.

Background

The Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is the country's largest food assistance program, accounting for over half of all food assistance expenditures. An average of 17.3 million people in 7.5 million households per month received food stamps in 2001². Unlike cash welfare assistance, the use of food stamps (except for able-bodied adults without dependents who do not meet work-related requirements) is not subject to time limits. The program is a critical part of the national social safety net. Although the federal welfare reform legislation restricted the eligibility of able-bodied adults without dependents and most immigrants, the Food Stamp Program is still designed as an entitlement program for most households in the United States whose income and assets

² The information on the Food Stamp Program in this section is drawn from Rosso (2003).

fall below certain levels.³ In 2001, the program provided an average monthly benefit of \$70 per person. Participants receive paper vouchers or an electronic benefit card that works like a debit card, to buy food at authorized grocery outlets. The amount of benefit a household receives largely depends upon its monthly income and expenses, and the number of household members.

The Provision of Private Food Assistance

Although soup kitchens and bread lines have been around for a long time, many researchers cite the early 1980's as a time of rapid expansion of the private food assistance system.⁴ The more visible direct providers of food to low-income households are soup kitchens, which provide a prepared meal for their clients to eat at the site, and food pantries, where households typically receive bags of food that they use to prepare meals at home. These organizations are locally based and rely heavily on volunteers, and the majority of them are affiliated with faith-based organizations (Poppendieck, 1998; Ohls, 2002,). Food banks and food rescue organizations serve as the "wholesalers" in the private food assistance system, supplying food pantries and soup kitchens with low-cost food, as well as training and technical assistance.

Much of the early data on the use of private food assistance was collected as part of state and local hunger surveys, many of which are reviewed by Nestle and Guttmacher (1992). Recent studies have attempted to document use of private food assistance over time. An annual survey of major American cities has reported steady increases in use of,

³ The eligibility of many legal immigrants was reinstated by the 2002 Farm Bill, which reauthorized

and demand for, community food resources, but the evidence comes almost exclusively from informal reports in various cities (Lowe 1999; US Mayors Conference, 2001). America's Second Harvest, a national network of food banks and food rescue organizations, has collected information from a sample of providers in its network in 1993, 1997, and 2001. While these surveys provide valuable information about this subset of providers and the people who rely on them, the differences in data collection methodologies from year to year make it difficult to use them to examine changes in the number of people who use America's Second Harvest providers over time. The most recent America's Second Harvest survey found that over half of food pantries reported that they served more people at the time of the survey than they had three years prior. (Kim, et al., 2001). This finding is consistent with that of a recent survey of a nationally representative sample of private food assistance providers, referred to as the national EFAS (Emergency Food Assistance System) survey. (Ohls, et al., 2002). The national EFAS survey also estimated that the use of food pantries, as measured by the reported number of clients served, increased by an average of five percent per year from 1997 to 2000 (Ohls, et al., 2002). However, the America's Second Harvest and the EFAS both relied on provider perceptions to estimate trends in use, a measure that is subject to error. Finally, Tiehen (2002), relying on data from the Current Population Study (CPS), estimated a two percent increase in the annual number of visits made to food pantries between 1998 and 2000 by U.S. households. However, the estimates rely on households' ability to recall and willingness to report their frequency of visits to food pantries. True longitudinal data on use of private assistance over time rarely exist, since community-

the Food Stamp Program for five years.

based providers are generally a loose collection of individual organizations, most of which have neither the resources nor the incentive to keep records on use, particularly at the individual level.

A few studies have examined how frequently households use private food assistance. A study of 400 low-income individuals in the Pittsburgh area concluded that over 90 percent of food pantry users received aid from food pantries once a month or less. Additionally, the researcher concluded that the median length of spell of food pantry use was about twenty months (Daponte 1998; Daponte 2000). Other research by America's Second Harvest asked agency heads to give their *perceptions* of how often their clients used services. Among food pantries, the average number of weeks clients visited the program was *estimated* to be 27 weeks in 1997 and 30 weeks in 1996 (Second Harvest 1997).⁵ The national EFAS study estimated frequency per month, as well as over the course of a year. They determined that more than half of users (55%) visited pantries once a month or less, that one quarter visited 2-3 times per month, and just over twenty percent visited weekly. Approximately 40 percent of pantry users received services in 10-12 months per year. Thirty percent visited only 1-3 months per year, with 30 percent receiving services between 4 to 9 months (Briefel, et al., 2003). In other words, past research has concluded that, on average, food pantry users relied on such services quite heavily.

The studies mentioned above use responses to questions from cross-sectional surveys to estimate trends in food pantry use or frequency of use. To be able to truly

⁴ See, for example, Burt (1992), Eisinger (1998), Poppendieck (1998) and DaPonte (2000).

⁵ Second Harvest included soup kitchens in their analysis, which are not in these analyses. Both the data and research methods are described in more depth later in the proposal.

assess use over time, as well as different patterns of receipt, one needs access to longitudinal data. Since heavier users of food pantries will be a disproportionate share of a cross-sectional dataset, the length of spells will be overestimated, as was often the case in the early literature on welfare and poverty spells (Bane and Ellwood 1994).

Many households may use a combination of public and private food assistance, possibly because neither source is sufficient for their needs. America's Second Harvest found that almost two-thirds of food pantry households had applied for food stamps, and that 31 percent had someone in the household currently receiving that benefit. An additional 7 percent were not currently receiving food stamps, but had at some point in the past twelve months (Kim, 2001). The national EFAS survey concluded that just under half of food pantry clients received food stamps in the previous twelve months (Briefel et al, 2003). Findings from two recent local surveys of food pantry and soup kitchen users report similar findings on food stamp use. About 44 percent of private food assistance recipients in Detroit, Michigan (Eisinger, 1999) and about 37 percent of private food assistance recipients in Virginia (Biggerstaff, et al., 2002) were estimated to also receive food stamps. Bartfeld (2003), however, found a much smaller Food Stamp Program participation rate in the past twelve months (22 percent) among a sample of single mothers using food pantries in Wisconsin.

Other studies (Mills and Kornfeld, 2000; Rangarajan and Gleason, 2001; Jensen, et al., 2002) have examined the well-being of people who left the Food Stamp Program caseloads, and these studies have found that many of those who stopped using food stamps continued to rely on private food assistance from food pantries and emergency kitchens.

Economic and Policy Climate of Kansas City

To put the study findings into context, it is helpful to have information on how the economic and policy climate, as well as the nonprofit sector in Kansas City, compare to the rest of the United States.

Kansas City is the largest city in Missouri, and the second largest metropolitan area. The metropolitan region is divided by a state line, and includes over eleven counties in both Missouri and Kansas. However, the bulk of population is located in three counties in Missouri (Jackson, Clay and Platte), and two counties in Kansas (Wyandotte and Johnson). In 2000 Kansas City's unemployment rate (3.2%) was lower than the rate for the state of Missouri (3.5%) and the national rate (4.0%).

The 1996 welfare reform legislation gave states flexibility in the design of their cash assistance programs, and they adopted a number of different policies, which help to provide information on the environment which low-income households face in their state. Gleason, et al. (2001) classify Missouri among the one-third of states with the least emphasis on work requirement and work encouragement policies. However, they classify Missouri among the one-third of states with the strictest time limits on receipt of cash assistance. The Kansas City area contained 18 percent of the state's AFDC caseload in 1999, proportional to its share of the total population. Similarly, the AFDC caseload declined by 42 percent between 1994 and 1999 in Kansas City, a figure close to the 1994-99 decline in the state (47%), and national caseload (48%).

Compared to other similarly sized metropolitan regions, Kansas City ranked above average in the percent of the gross metropolitan product contributed by non profit

agencies (Helm, Cook and Renz 2002). Not only does Kansas City have a fairly sizeable nonprofit community, it also has a strong philanthropic base. Kansas City is home to a number of sizeable foundations, including the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Hall Family Foundation, and the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation. As of 2000, there were 481 foundations in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area that contributed more than \$317 million dollars to the region (Helm, Cook and Renz 2002). Additionally, there is a strong individual donor base in the area. In 2000, individual charitable contributions in the region were above the national average (Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, 2002). Although more difficult to document, the strong donor base, combined with strong public and corporation support, has placed an increasing emphasis on collaboration in the non profit sector. Renz (1999) provides a number of examples of collaborative efforts involving nonprofit organizations in Kansas City. There is likely greater knowledge of, and communication between, nonprofits in this area than is true nationwide. This may influence the generalizability of our results.

Data

As noted previously, we use data from both the public and private side of the food safety net. Data on private assistance is provided by the Mid-America Assistance Coalition (MAAC), a non-profit agency in Kansas City, Missouri, that coordinates the work of social service organizations that provide emergency services in the Kansas City metropolitan area. As part of this coordination, MAAC oversees the MAACLink database, a system that collects and maintains information about private assistance provided in the community. Through the use of standard intake forms and on-line intake,

MAAC collects consistent and reliable information. MAACLink contains approximately 1.1 million service records from more than 227 community-based organizations, including all the large food pantries.

Although it is difficult to determine the exact coverage of the database, only a handful of community agencies in the metropolitan area have refused to participate in MaacLink, and MAAC estimates are that it tracks up to 90 percent of all emergency services. Although data collection does put a burden on agency staff, there are several reasons that agencies choose to participate. First, the system allows them to easily document their services and population. They can use this information for planning purposes, as well as to provide evidence of productivity and efficiency to funders. Second, the system allows agencies to avoid duplication, and direct individuals to the correct agency, depending on their particular need. Finally, some agencies may be required to participate, depending on their source of funds. Groups that distribute particular forms of utility assistance, receive FEMA food or shelter, Toys for Tots, or Jackson County funds for homeless case management must participate in MaacLink.

The variation among the organizations that participate in MAACLink is quite large. They range from 13 Salvation Army sites, which together comprise the largest emergency assistance provider in the city, to individual churches that operate food pantries for just a few hours each week. Some focus primarily on food services, while others have utility assistance or shelter, as their main mission⁶. Examining only those agencies that distribute some food services, we find that about 2/3 operate at least five days a week. However, the majority are open for only a few hours each day. Almost sixty

⁶ In this study, we only assess agencies that distribute some food services.

percent of the agencies distribute USDA commodities⁷. Finally, approximately two-thirds are classified as religious, or faith based⁸.

Agencies that submit data to the MAAC database provide a complete picture of the recipients, services and agencies. Information collected includes the name and social security number of the recipient⁹, the date service was received, the type of service, and the estimated value of that service. Recipients are also asked for information about other household members. In many ways, MAACLink is similar to a state administrative caseload database.

The database has a series of protocols to ensure data integrity and accuracy. All individuals who submit data to the system have to participate in training for the database. This ensures consistency in definitions across the many participating agencies. Finally, the MAAC system has its own internal checks for name and social security number duplications¹⁰.

There are four major types of food assistance in the database. In-kind services, such as a bag or box of food, are by far the most common, accounting for more than 65 percent of food assistance. The second most frequent services are USDA commodities, followed by holiday food assistance (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter) and finally, vouchers or cash assistance.

⁷ Many private food assistance providers distribute USDA commodities to households, mainly through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Originally, the foods distributed through TEFAP were surplus commodities that had been purchased by the Federal government to support agricultural prices. Since 1988, USDA has been authorized to purchase food specifically for TEFAP.

⁸ Many pantries impose some sort of income and geographic restrictions on clients, serving only those from a specific geographic area, with household income below a certain threshold. However, it is not clear how rigidly such rules are enforced. Most agencies also stated that they limited the frequency of visits for individuals; this ranged from once a week to once a month.

⁹ Recipients are asked to provide copies of social security numbers to verify the numbers are accurate.

As with any data set, there are some limitations. In the Maaclink system, data is entered at the client level, with client defined as the individual actually receiving the food at the agency. The client then reports about other members of his/her household. Theoretically, the client is asked to update household information at each visit; in reality, this is not always done. Thus, the information regarding other household members is not as accurate as that regarding service receipt data, such as date and type of service received, estimated value, and client contact information.

Nevertheless, we believe the MAAC database is the most comprehensive database in the nation regarding private assistance in part because it has consistently tracked service receipt over the past several years. For this project, we focused exclusively on one aspect of the database, food services. The food providers here are almost exclusively food pantries. No soup kitchens or similar organizations are included in the database. The burden of reporting data for such organizations would simply be too great.

To assess reliance on the public side, we use state administrative Food Stamp Program records for the period January 1998-May 2001. This information is available for Jackson, Clay and Platte counties in Missouri. Together, these three counties comprised the bulk of the Kansas City metropolitan area. For each data set, we relied on household address information to limit our sample to persons that lived in one of the three counties of interest (Jackson, Clay and Platte)¹¹.

¹⁰ Confidentiality is critical to the success of the database. All volunteers and workers at service providers must sign confidentiality agreements regarding the data, as do researchers who are allowed to analyze the information.

¹¹ This was especially important for food pantry data, since pantries could have served persons in other geographic regions of the metropolitan area.

We link the Food Stamp Program and MAACLink data, using the social security number of the household head present in each of the files to link the two data sets¹². In the MAACLink data, we define the household head as the person who picks up food at the food pantry. In the Food Stamp Program data, the household head is defined by the caseworker, and is typically the person who applies for the program. This method of match may understate the degree of overlap in the use of the two forms of food assistance. For example, if there are members of the food stamp household, other than the head of household, who access food pantries, we may not account for the household's use of the food pantry. However, we find evidence that this is not likely to be a common occurrence, since only about 10 percent of food stamp households contain a second adult. Likewise, less than 10 percent of food pantry households contained more than 1 adult who accessed a food pantry. In these households, we designated the adult with the most visits to the pantry as the household head.

Findings

We first provide information regarding trends in use of both private and public assistance for this geographic location. Figure 1 shows the number of food pantry households served per month from January 1998 through May 2001. Two things are immediately apparent. The first is the strong seasonal effect on receipt of private food assistance. The majority of the increase during November and December is due to receipt of holiday related food baskets. The second is the rather flat trend line, with no more

¹² There are cases in both datasets missing this information; thus it is not possible to link a small subset of the cases. In the Maac files, less than .5% of cases are missing social security numbers. Persons reluctant to give a social security number, such as undocumented immigrants, are assigned a unique identifier.

households using food pantries in 2001 than in 1998. This is consistent with evidence from the Current Population Survey, a nationally representative data set, where the number of visits made to food pantries was estimated to have increased by only about 2 percent from 1998 to 2000, from 12.7 million visits in 1998 to 12.9 million visits in 2000 (Tiehen, 2002). However, other data sources have indicated larger increases in the use of food pantries. In a recent nationwide survey, private food assistance providers reported that demand at food pantries, as measured by number of meals served, increased 16.5 percent overall between 1997 to 2000 (Ohls, et al., 2002) America's Second Harvest, a national network of food banks that represents almost 80 percent of food banks in the country, reported that almost 60 percent of providers in their network indicated that they served more clients in 2001 than in 1998 (Kim, et al, 2001). These surveys, while providing valuable detailed information about private food assistance providers, relied on provider recall to estimate the change in demand at food pantries. One advantage of the MAACLink is that private food assistance providers actually document the use of their services, so that it provides a more reliable indicator of change in food pantry use over time than one that relies on providers' ability to recall changes over time.

The trends in food stamp receipt for this location tell a somewhat different story. Food stamp receipt was relatively flat the first two years, but began a small, but gradual increase around July of 2000 (Figure 2). The Food Stamp Program served 19,259 households in these three counties in an average month in 1998. This increased slightly to 20,005 households in an average month in 2000. This slight increase between 1998 and 2000 is in contrast to the trend in the overall Food Stamp caseload in Missouri, which decreased by about 3.4 percent from 1998 to 2000, and the national Food Stamp

caseload, which decreased by almost 10 percent over that time period. It is important to note that much of the recent decline in the Food Stamp Program caseload had already occurred by 1998. Between 1994 and 1998, 2.8 million U.S. households left the Food Stamp Program, which accounted for almost 80 percent of the 1994-2000 national caseload decline. As one would expect, Food Stamp Program caseloads did not experience the dramatic spike during the holiday season that is witnessed in the use of food pantries.

Clearly more people in the metropolitan region rely on public, as opposed to private, food assistance. In any given month, the number of food stamp households is about four times that of food pantry households. The gap closes considerably in the holiday months of November and December, when the ratio dips as low as almost two to one.

Of course, many of those monthly clients are repeat users. Examining the unique number of households served by each type of food assistance provides further insight into the degree to which each type of assistance reaches those in need. Over the forty-one month time frame, more than 66,000 households were served by the Food Stamp program, compared to just over 42,000 that relied on private food assistance providers (Table 1). Thus, although private food assistance providers still served fewer distinct households than Food Stamps, the gap was not as large as when examining monthly trends. In other words, a larger percent of food pantry clients received food assistance on an infrequent basis. This point is made more clearly when examining the patterns of receipt for each service.

Of the forty-one observed months, the average food stamp household received benefits in twelve months, while the median months of receipt was seven (Table 1). Twenty-two percent of food stamp recipients received benefits in more than half of the observed months (Table 1). This contrasts sharply with patterns of private food assistance receipt. Food pantry households received aid in only five months on average; the median number of months assistance was received was only two of the 41 observed months. Over three-fourths of food pantry households relied on assistance in five or fewer months¹³.

Joint Use of Public and Private Food Assistance

In this study, we are particularly interested in the joint use of private and public food assistance. To what extent do these systems serve the same population? Among households that use both forms of food assistance, how can we characterize their patterns of usage? We first examine joint use of both systems over the entire time period, and then examine the timing of the joint use.

Of the 43,000 plus households receiving private food assistance, 57 percent received food stamp benefits at some point between January 1998 and May 2001, though not necessarily concurrently with private food assistance (Table 2). Conversely, forty-three percent of those that used private food assistance never accessed food stamps during the 41-month period. Among food pantry households that accessed food stamps, most did so within 3 months of having used a food pantry. In fact, about 38 percent of

¹³ The concept of spells is not a very useful one when assessing use of food pantries. In general, individuals tended to use such resources very sporadically, and rarely over several consecutive months. Many users had very short spell durations; the median spell length was two months for all users, including repeat spells). Thus, we report food pantry use in terms of the total number of months services were received.

food pantry households received food stamps simultaneously in at least one month of the study period. These households accounted for about two-thirds of food pantry households that received food stamps at any time during the study period. Less than 17 percent of food pantry households that received food stamps did so outside of a 6-month window of their food pantry receipt. These findings are consistent with Tiehen (2001), who finds that 60 percent of food pantry users had received food stamps in the previous year and 40 percent had received food stamps in the previous month. Furthermore, other national studies of emergency food use (Kim, et al., 2001; Briefel, et al, 2003; Nord, et al., 2002), find that roughly 40 percent of food pantry users were simultaneously receiving food stamps. Although the data do not provide enough information to allow us to determine whether food pantry users who are not receiving food stamps are eligible to receive them, it is doubtful that the low use of food stamps could be fully attributed to a lack of eligibility. In fact, a recent survey of a nationally representative sample of food pantries finds that 90 percent of food pantry users were eligible for the Food Stamp Program (Briefel et al., 2003).

The likelihood that food stamp households accessed private food assistance was lower than the likelihood that food pantry households accessed food stamps. Just over one-third of those who relied on food stamps received help at some time from private food assistance providers between January 1998 and May 2001. However, 25 percent of households that received food stamps between January 1998 and May 2001 also used a food pantry during at least one of the months they received food stamps. Still, this result shows that most food stamp households (75%) did not supplement their food stamps by going to a food pantry during a month of food stamp receipt. In fact, only a small

percentage of food stamp households used a food pantry within a 6-month window of food stamp receipt. As shown in Table 2, less than four percent of food stamp households used a food pantry either 3 months before or 3 months after receiving food stamps. Interestingly, however, almost one-quarter of joint users accessed food pantries outside of the six month window of food stamp receipt. For this group, the types of assistance appear to be fairly separate processes.

As one would expect, the percent of joint users increased in November and December. In December of 1998, 1999, and 2000, approximately 17 percent of food stamp households received private food assistance (Figure 3). In other months, less than eight percent of food stamp households also used a food pantry. However, there was no evidence that more food stamp users relied on private food assistance in 2001 than in previous years. Additionally, there was no clear pattern regarding the percent of food pantry users simultaneously relying on food stamps. In any given month, about one-third of those who used food pantries in the MAAC system received food stamps simultaneously (Figure 4).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study uses a unique database of clients of food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area to document the use of private food assistance from January 1998 to May 2001. With these data, we show that, while the use of private food assistance is widespread in the Kansas City area, the increase in use during this time period has been quite small. We are also able to provide evidence of a considerable degree of seasonality in the use of private food assistance, with a 60 percent increase in use during the month of December.

Given the low frequency of use, our results suggest that food pantries serve an extremely wide cliental, wider than is often concluded in cross-sectional studies. In fact, across the three year time period, more than thirteen percent of the households in the three counties visited a food pantry. Many households rely on such services, even though the majority does so infrequently. Clearly, food pantries play a critical, and unique role in the safety net.

We merged the data on clients of food pantries with data from Food Stamp Program administrative records, which allows us to compare use of the two types of food assistance, and examine the interactions between their use. We find that food stamp use was much more common than use of food pantries. Over four times as many households used food stamps as used food pantries in a given month. We also find that the use of food stamps was much more frequent than the use of food pantries. Further, we find that in any given month less than 10 percent of food stamp recipients also used a food pantry. This is striking, and implies that, while many households used both forms of food assistance, very few households used food pantries to supplement their food stamp benefits in the months that they received them.

Although only about one-third of food pantry users received food stamps in any given month, there was a great deal of overlap between use of the two kinds of food assistance. Of households that used a food pantry at some time between January 1998 and May 2001, almost 60 percent had also received food stamps at some time during that period. However, this means that roughly 40 percent of food pantry client households did not receive food stamps during this time period, although their reported incomes were quite low.

When we examine the timing of joint use, the majority of joint users (67%) receive both services in the same month. This implies that households are not substituting the two forms of assistance, but rather accessing as many forms of help as possible during times of need.

Our results are specific to a particular geographic area. As noted earlier, there may be reason to suspect that the network of food pantries in this area is unique, and that the high level of collaboration and cooperation necessary for data collection may not exist in all other metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, we have little reason to believe that our results would differ substantially from other geographic areas.

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