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Trends in Food Pantry Use Since Welfare Reform: Evidence from the Kansas City Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

This study uses a unique database to examine the trend in the use of food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area from 1997 to 2000. We find a slight increase in the use of food pantry services over this period, less than one percent annually. This is a much smaller increase than has been reported in other studies, but consistent with recent research that uses a series of national cross-sectional household surveys to document changes in food pantry use (Tiehen 2002). In addition to examining trends in food pantry use, this study assesses the effect that accounting for providers who cease operations has on estimates of the change in food pantry use derived from a cross-sectional sample of emergency food providers. We conclude that in the absence of information from exiting agencies, the estimated growth rate can be gravely overstated, at least in terms of the number of services provided.

Introduction

Although federal programs provide most food assistance to low-income households in the U.S., many private, nonprofit, local organizations play an important role in helping low-income households meet their food needs. Many households turn to a food pantry or other emergency food provider in their community when they need food. While it is difficult to determine the number of people who turn to emergency food providers, a recent nationwide survey of clients at food pantries estimated that approximately 4.3 million U.S. households used food pantries during an average month in 2001 (Briefel, et al., 2002).

The declines in both the cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads since the mid-1990s have prompted an interest in the use of emergency food providers and how that use has changed over time. The number of people receiving cash assistance dropped by nearly 60 percent and the number of people using food stamps decreased 37 percent between 1994 and 2000. A strong economy certainly contributed to the decline in the use of federal assistance. However, the declines occurred during a time of enormous change in social policy toward low-income households. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (commonly known as welfare reform) gave states more flexibility in the design of their welfare programs, but imposed work requirements on cash welfare recipients, and time limits on the receipt of Federal cash assistance. These changes may also have affected participation in the Food Stamp Program since participation in these programs has traditionally been linked. The legislation also restricted the eligibility of some groups to receive food stamps.

Many observers have expressed concern that some of those who have left the programs have not achieved self-sufficiency. These households may have instead come to depend on

emergency food providers for assistance in meeting their food needs. Increased use of emergency food assistance in the midst of falling cash assistance and Food Stamp Program caseloads signals a shift to greater reliance on nonprofit organizations versus public sources of assistance.

It is difficult to accurately assess national trends in the use of emergency food since most community-level emergency food providers do not keep records of the services they provide. Most estimates of changes in the use of emergency food must rely on providers' ability to recall changes in the use of their services. In addition, the estimates are derived from information from only those emergency food providers who are operating at the time of the survey. It may be that, while many of the agencies in operation have experienced increases in use, other agencies have stopped providing emergency food.

This study uses a unique database to examine the trend in the use of food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area from 1997 to 2000. Emergency assistance providers, including food pantries, reported the number and value of services they provided each month, and this information is recorded in the database. We find a slight increase in the use of food pantry services in the Kansas City metropolitan area from March 1997 to March 2000, less than one percent annually. This is a much smaller increase than has been reported in other studies, but consistent with recent research that uses a series of national cross-sectional household surveys to document changes in food pantry use (Tiehen 2002).

The database contains information on the vast majority of food pantries in Kansas City, including those who began operating or stopped operating between 1997 and 2000. Because it is a longitudinal database, it does not rely on provider recall. In addition to examining trends in food pantry use, this study assesses the effect that accounting for providers who cease operations

has on estimates of the change in food pantry use derived from a cross-sectional sample of emergency food providers. We document a high degree of agency stability in this geographic location. Nevertheless, we conclude that in the absence of information from exiting agencies, the estimated growth rate can be gravely overstated, at least in terms of the number of services provided. The bias resulting in the estimate of the change in the value of services provided was much smaller.

Background

Many researchers cite the early 1980's as the period when the emergency food assistance system emerged in its current form.ⁱ The more visible direct providers of food to low-income households are soup kitchens, which provide individuals with food cooked on-site, and food pantries, which provide food for individuals to take with them to prepare meals, usually at home. These organizations are locally based and rely heavily on volunteers, and the majority of them are affiliated with religious organizations (Ohls, et al, 2002). Food banks and food rescue organizations serve as the "wholesalers" in the emergency food assistance system, supplying food pantries and soup kitchens with low-cost food, as well as training and technical assistance.

There have been a number of local and state studies of hunger that have documented the use of soup kitchens and food pantries.ⁱⁱ In addition, the U.S. Conference of Mayors conducts a survey of officials in 27 selected cities to obtain information about changes in the use of emergency food (U.S Conference of Mayors, 2001). However, because of the limited number of cities, and the reliance on estimates from a small number of emergency food providers in each city, it is difficult to draw conclusions from this study on national trends in food pantry use.

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 that 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, as well as a recent survey of a nationally representative sample of emergency food providers, 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; Ohls, et al., 2002) The national survey estimated that the use of food pantries, as measured by number of clients served, increased by an average of 5 percent per year from 1997 to 2000.

The national study of emergency food providers provides a broad, nationally representative view of emergency food providers. However, there are two potential sources of bias in the estimates of the change in the use of food pantries from the study. First, the estimate is based on providers' perceptions regarding the number of clients they served during 2000, the time of the survey, and their ability to recall the number of clients they had served in 1997. In addition, because the national survey was administered to a sample of providers operating in March 2000, it does not contain information on changes in use from providers who had stopped operating between 1997 and 2000. This study investigates these two potential sources of bias, using a local-level database of food pantries to document recent changes in the use of food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area. It also includes information on providers who stopped operating between 1997 and 2000 to evaluate the extent to which the annual growth estimate from the national survey of food pantries may be influenced by the lack of information on food pantries stopped providing services.

Data

The Mid-America Assistance Coalition (MAAC), a non-profit agency in Kansas City, Missouri, coordinates the work of social service organizations 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 on services and the recipients of services from agencies in the area. Its database (MAACLink) contains approximately 1.1 million service records from more than 227 community-based organizations, including all the large food pantries. Services in the database are not limited to food, and include utility and rent assistance as well as consumer items, such as school supplies. The organizations that submit information to MAACLink range from 13 Salvation Army sites, which together comprise the largest emergency assistance provider in the city, to individual churches who operate food pantries for just a few hours each week. MAAC staff estimate that MAACLink includes more than 90 percent of all community providers.

The MAACLink database provides a detailed picture of social service agencies, the kinds of services they provide, and the people who receive their services. The database includes information on the name and social security number of each recipient, the date service was received, the type of service, and the estimated value of that service. All agencies are asked to provide a value for each service given. For in-kind services, such as bags of food or clothing, the agencies assign values to the service based on guidelines provided by MAAC that have remained constant over the study period. That is, presumably the same bag of food would be assigned the same value, regardless of the agency.

MAAC has developed a series of protocols to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data. 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. Additionally, when individuals request a service their identification has to be verified with documentation, including a social security card.ⁱⁱⁱ They are also asked to provide their own as well as other family members' social security cards. Finally, the MAAC system has its own internal checks for name and social security number duplications.^{iv} In many ways, MAACLink is similar to a state public assistance program administrative database.

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. There are four major types of food assistance services in the database. In-kind services, such as a bag or box of food, are by far the most common, accounting for more than 80 percent of food assistance. The second most frequent services are USDA commodities, followed by holiday food assistance (Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter) and vouchers or cash.^v Although these services are recorded separately in MAACLink, clients often receive more than one type of service at each visit. For example, if a food pantry provides a client with a bag or box of food that contains USDA commodities, they will record this as two separate food services.

We believe the MAAC database is the most comprehensive database in the nation regarding nonprofit food assistance in part because it has consistently tracked service receipt over the past several years. As such, these data offer a unique opportunity to assess longitudinal

trends in nonprofit food assistance for one specific geographic area, and how they differ from estimates derived from a cross-sectional survey.

Food Pantries in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area

We focus on the use of food pantries in Kansas City, Missouri from March 1997 to March 2000. To estimate the impact of welfare reform on the use of food pantries, it would be ideal to have information on their use both before and after the welfare reform legislation was enacted. However, the MaacLink system only became computerized in 1994 and many providers were not participating until 1996. The data series, though, provides us with important information about trends in the use of food pantries during the post welfare-reform era, when use of public food assistance was on the decline. The focus on this time period also allows us to compare our estimates to those from the recent national survey of nonprofit emergency food providers.

The food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area represent a fraction of food pantries across the nation. To help interpret our findings on trends over time in the use of food pantries, it is helpful to compare food pantries in Kansas City to a nationally representative sample of food pantries. The nationwide study of emergency food providers collected data on a nationally representative cross-section of emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, food rescue organizations and emergency food organizations, beginning in March 2000.^{vi}

For the nationwide survey, 1,592 pantries were interviewed; they represented 32,700 pantries nationwide. From March 1997 to March 2000, 144 agencies submitted food service records to the MAACLink system. Although these agencies are limited to one metropolitan area, they are located in two states, Missouri and Kansas.

As shown in Table 1, almost half of the food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area served fewer than 30 clients per month, and 85 percent served fewer than 150 clients per month. Large food pantries, defined as those serving 150 or more people per month, are less common in Kansas City than in the national sample. Large pantries account for less than one in seven food pantries in Kansas City, while they account for one in four pantries in the national sample. However, it is important to note that the way size was calculated in the two samples differed. Agencies in the national survey were asked to report the number of clients served monthly; thus the size of these agencies is based on the perception of the providers. The size of agencies in MAACLink was determined by the number of services submitted to the database for that month. One possibility, therefore, is that we are capturing the difference between provider estimates of use, and the number of services actually recorded, as opposed to any true size differences between the two samples.

Table 1 also shows that the average agency in the Kansas City metropolitan area was open more days per week, and more hours per day (on days of operation) than the average agency in the national sample. Almost 70 percent of MAAC food pantries operated at least five days per week, compared to only 29 percent of agencies in the national survey. Over half of the agencies in the national sample reported being open no more than 2 days per week; sixteen percent were only open a few days per month. The story is somewhat similar when we compare hours of operation. Overall, MAAC food pantries were open more hours than those agencies in the national survey. However, most agencies operated only a few hours per day, regardless of their location. The median agency in the MAACLink data operated fewer than five hours per day, while the median agency in the national sample operated fewer than three hours per day.

It was fairly common for organizations to provide other types of assistance in addition to food, as shown in Table 2. These included furniture and clothing, transportation, counseling, rent, and utility aid. Agencies in the MAAC system were slightly more likely to offer non-food services than agencies nationwide. Seventy-seven percent of MAAC agencies offered non-food services compared to 68 percent of national agencies. Although the different data collection methodologies do not allow for many direct comparisons, Table 2 provides some information on the types of non-food services offered by food pantries. Among food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area, almost three-fourths provide utility assistance, and a majority provide rent assistance, clothing or furniture, or medical or health assistance. MAACLink agencies were slightly more likely to provide clothing or furniture and transportation aid than agencies in the nationwide survey.

On some characteristics the two groups of agencies were remarkably similar. Just over half distributed USDA commodities; 59 percent of MAAC agencies and 52 percent of those in the national survey. In addition, two-thirds of agencies in both samples were considered religious or faith-based.

Although the main mission of the agencies in the Kansas City metropolitan area and in the national sample is to provide food to low-income persons, there were some clear differences between the two groups, most notably in the numbers of clients served, and the days per week and hours per day of operation. These differences raise a cautionary flag; it could be that agencies also differed in unmeasured ways related to patterns of receipt.

Trends in Food Pantry Use, 1997 to 2000

To assess trends in nonprofit food assistance over time, we examined service records for a three-year period, from March 1997 to March 2000. Figure 1 displays the number of food

services provided per month by all the agencies in the system.^{vii} A clear seasonal pattern on food pantry use is evidenced, with receipt of services clearly spiking in November and December. In some years, the peak continues through March. The average number of food services provided per month was 9,855 over the 3 year period. In the months of November and December, food pantries provided 11,622 food services, or 18 percent more than in the average month.

Although there were seasonal spikes, the overall trend line was rather flat. The average number of monthly services provided for the period April 1997-March 1998 was 9,922; from April 1998-March 1999, the average number of services was 9,638 and from April 1999-March 2000, it was 10,030. This represents a 1.1 percent increase from April 1997-March 1998 to April 1999-March 2000.

Next, we examined the trends regarding the value of services provided. As noted previously, each service is assigned a monetary value. Over the entire three year period, the average monthly value of food services was more than \$379,000. The value of services, like the number of services, tended to peak during the holiday season, specifically in November and December. However, the *value* of services provided increased much more dramatically than the *number* of services over time. For the twelve month period April 1997-March 1998, the average value per month was \$354, 973, for April 1998-March 1999, it had increased to \$366,713 and by April 1999-March 2000, it was \$421,730. This represents an increase of almost 19 percent in the average monthly value of services.

While the *number* of services has remained relatively stable, the *value* of services has increased over time, which means that the value of the average service has been increasing. Simply put, individuals visiting a food pantry in 2000 received more food than those visiting a

food pantry in 1997. Whether that is due to an increase in the food supply or an increase in need, however, cannot be determined.

Implications for Estimates of the Growth in the Use of Food Pantries

To our knowledge, MAACLink is only the longitudinal data source on receipt of emergency food assistance and other emergency services. Thus, in this section we exploit the longitudinal nature of MAACLink to assess the bias in growth estimates that might arise from relying on cross-sectional estimates only. We separated agencies into three groups, labeled stayers, entrants, and leavers. Stayers were defined as agencies that operated in both the first observed twelve months, April 1997-March 1998, and the last observed twelve months of the time period, April 1999-May 2000. Entrants were classified as agencies that began operating after the first twelve months, while leavers were defined as agencies operating in the first twelve months (April 1997-March 1998) only.

Overall, there was a remarkable degree of stability among the MAAC agencies. Very few began or ceased operations during the three-year period. Of the 140 agencies, 111, or 79 percent were classified as stayers (Table 3). Only nine percent were defined as “entrants”, or agencies that entered the system during the observed period. In contrast, the nationwide survey found that 28 percent of food pantries nationally had been operating for three years or less.^{viii} Twelve percent of agencies in MAACLink ceased operations during the observed period.

The vast majority of services were provided by “stayer” agencies, regardless of the time period examined. Table 3 shows the similarity between the number of services provided across the two time periods, 119,070 versus 120,366. In other words, the overall growth rate was negligible. In fact, the number contributed by stable agencies was almost identical over the two

time periods. Entering agencies provided slightly more services than exiting organizations, although the difference was quite small, especially relative to those provided by stable agencies.

Figure 2 shows that the growth rate in the receipt of services from food pantries is more modest when we account for food pantries that ceased operating between March 1997 and March 2000. Accounting for exiting food pantries reduces the rate of growth from 2.1 percent annually to 0.5 percent annually. Although the absolute change was small, the magnitude of the change was large, a reduction of more than 75 percent.

Examining the value of services over time provides a similar, but not identical story (Table 3). Again, stable agencies contributed the vast majority of expenditures. However, there was a striking divergence between the value of food services contributed by entering, as opposed to exiting, agencies. Organizations new to the MAACLink system provided more than five times the value of exiting agencies, \$508,529 compared to only \$96,374. It could be that agencies that cease operations do so gradually, and in the waning months the number and value of services provided is slowly curtailed.

As shown in Figure 3, the growth rate for the value of services was much sharper than growth for the number of services. In fact, the estimated growth rate for the value of services provided was 10.8 percent annually. Additionally, the bias that results from the omission of exiting agencies was quite small; adding in that information reduces the rate to 9.9 percent annually, a reduction of less than ten percent.

Summary and Conclusions

This study finds evidence of a slight increase in the use of food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area between 1997 and 2000. The number of food services provided by food

pantries increased by less than 1 percent annually during this time period. Although this increase is quite small compared to a recent nationwide survey of emergency food providers, it is consistent with a recent study that uses Current Population Survey data, which finds that the estimated number of visits made to food pantries increased by about 2 percent from 1998 to 2000 (Tiehen, 2002). While the number of food services provided remained fairly constant between 1997 and 2000, the value of the food services provided increased by almost 19 percent. This study also finds a great deal of stability among food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area between 1997 and 2000. Almost 87 percent of food pantries that operated between April 1997 and March 1998 were still in operation between April 1999 and March 2000, and they accounted for over 95 percent of the food services provided between April 1999 and March 2000.

When we calculate the growth in the use of food pantry services without considering the pantries that had stopped operating between 1997 and 2000, the estimated growth rate is 2.1 percent annually. Although only one and one-half percentage points greater, it is almost four times as large as the “true” growth rate; that is, the growth rate that is calculated using information on all food pantries in the system. Thus, without such information, the growth rate may be significantly overstated.

Although we find only a slight increase in the number of food services provided by Kansas City metropolitan area food pantries, this does not imply that welfare reform did not have an impact on the use of nonprofit emergency food assistance. We do not know how the use of food pantries might have changed in the absence of welfare reform, and did not attempt in this study to measure the effect of the provisions of the welfare reform legislation on food pantry use. However, the increase in use of food pantries during a period of strong economic growth is cause

for concern and necessitates further research on the interactions between the use of public and nonprofit assistance.

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Table 1. Operating Characteristics of Food Pantries: A Comparison of the Kansas City Metropolitan Area to a National Sample

	Kansas City	National Survey
<u>Number of Persons Served Per Month</u>		
	(Percent)	
Less Than 30	44	37
31 – 150	41	36
Over 150	15	25
<u>Number of Days Per Week Operating</u>		
7 days a week	12	5
5-6 days per week	56	24
3-4 days per week	18	15
1-2 days per week	24	35
Several times per month	2	16
<u>Number of Hours Per Day Operating</u>		
2 or less	15	31
3 or 4	34	30
5 or 6	12	14
7 or 8	28	14
More than 8	10	5

Data Sources: MAACLink Data and Ohls, et al. (2002)

Table 2. Non-Food Services Provided by Food Pantries

	Kansas City	National Survey
Offers non-food services	77%	68%
Offers specific types of non-food service		
Utility assistance	72%	NA
Rent assistance	62%	NA
Clothing/Furniture	54%	48%
Medical/Health	51%	NA
Transportation	31%	24%

Data Sources: MAACLink Data and Ohls, et al. (2002).

Table 3. Number of Food Services Provided by Stayers, Entrants, and Leavers in the MAAC System., 1997 - 2000

	Stayers	Entrants	Leavers	All Food Pantries
Number of agencies	111	12	17	140
Percent of all agencies	79%	9%	12%	110%
Number of Services Provided				
April 1997-March 1998	115,567	0	3,503	119,070
April 1999-March 2000	115,594	4,772	0	120,366
Value of Services Provided				
April 1997-March 1998	\$4,163,310	0	\$96,374	\$4,259,684
April 1999-March 2000	\$4,552,242	\$508,259	0	\$5,060,771

Data Source: MAACLink.

Figure 1: Monthly Number of Food Services Provided by Kansas City Metropolitan Area Food Pantries, March 1997 – March 2000

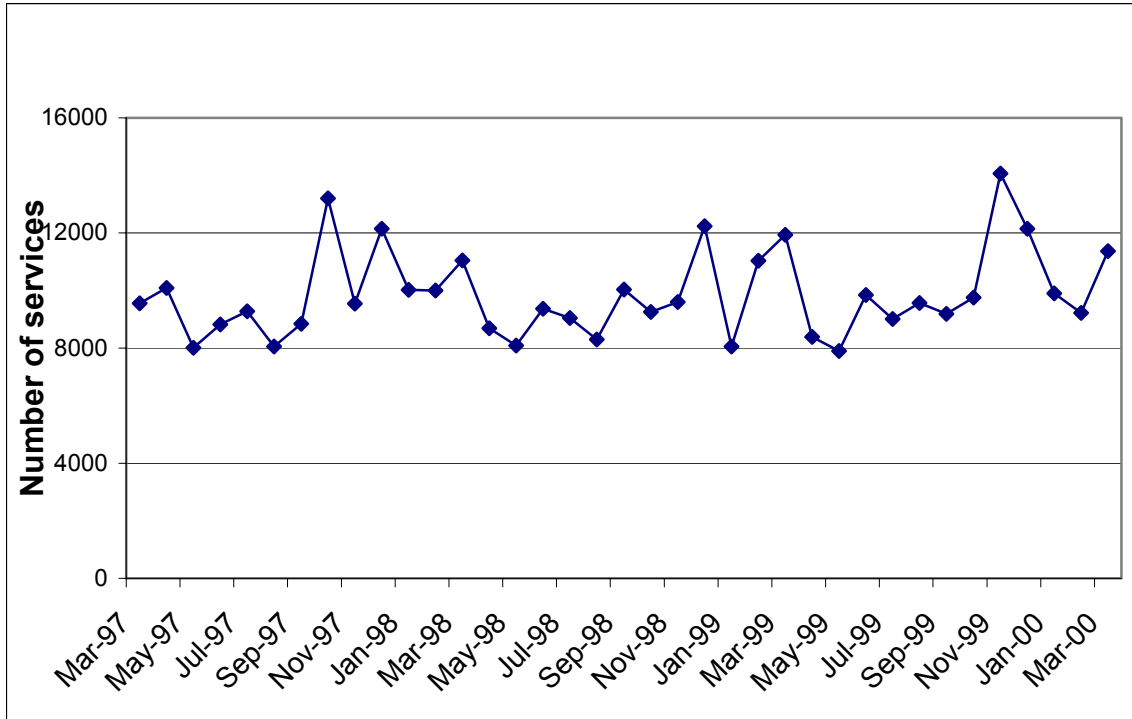


Figure 2. Estimated Growth of Number of Food Pantry Services

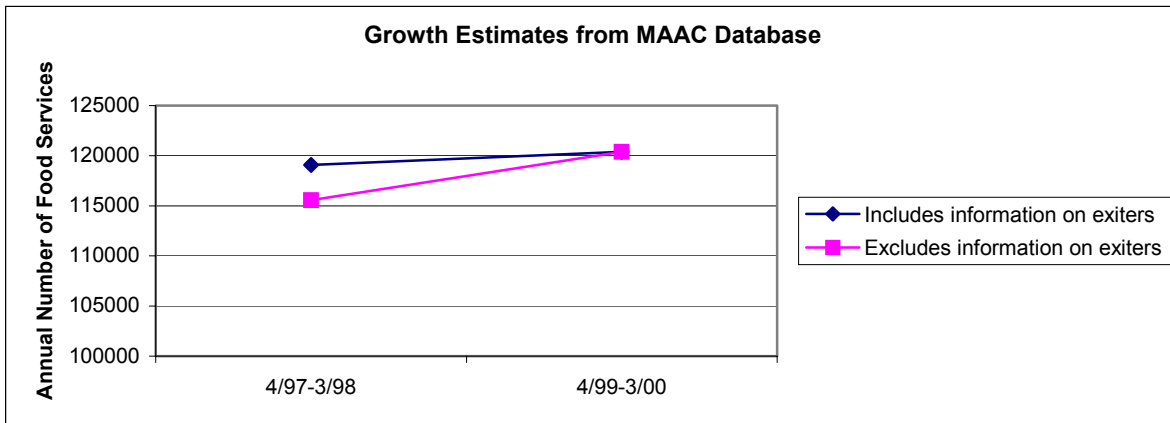
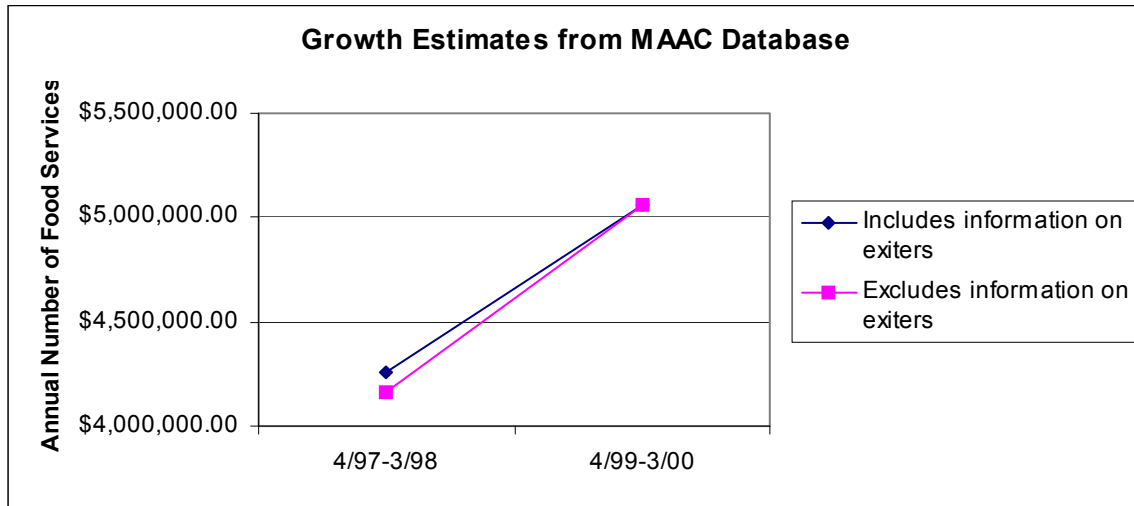


Figure 3. Estimated Growth Rates for the Value of Food Pantry Services



ⁱ See, for example, Burt (1992) and Poppendieck (1998).

ⁱⁱ Many of the state and local hunger studies are reviewed in Nestle and Gutmacher (1992). More recent studies include Eisinger (1998, 2002), Daponte (1998, 2000), Biggerstaff et al (2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Recipients are asked to provide copies of social security numbers to verify the numbers are accurate. If individuals, such as undocumented immigrants, do not supply social security numbers, they can still receive services. However, only a small number of clients, less than 1%, are missing social security numbers in the database.

^{iv} 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.

^v Many food banks, food pantries, and emergency kitchens receive and distribute USDA commodities through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which began in 1981. 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 and provide administrative support to the agencies that distribute the commodities.

^{vi} The actual interview period ranged from March to October 2000.

^{vii} A service is not identical to a visit. Some individuals may have received more than one service at a particular visit.

^{viii} This rather large discrepancy raises the possibility that we are missing a portion of the entering agencies in the MaaLink database. It could be that new agencies do not immediately join MaaLink, but instead are introduced to the system over time. If young agencies are underrepresented in MaaLink, then the estimated growth rate will be biased downward.