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The Emergency Food Assistance System— Findings From the Client Survey

Executive Summary

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Miki Satake, Brittany Dawson, and Rhoda Cohen



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The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Client Survey: Executive Summary. By Ronette Briefel, Jonathan Jacobson, Nancy Clusen, Teresa Zavitsky, Miki Satake, Brittany Dawson, and Rhoda Cohen 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. 32.

Abstract

During a typical month in 2001, food pantries served about 12.5 million people, and emergency kitchens served about 1.1 million people. Food pantries and emergency kitchens play an important role in feeding 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 support. This report presents findings from a national study of EFAS clients, which surveyed clients who received emergency food assistance from selected food pantries and emergency kitchens. The study finds that food pantries and emergency kitchens serve a diverse clientele, but that almost three-fourths of those served are food insecure. The majority of EFAS households receive Federal food assistance, including two-thirds of food pantry clients and 45 percent of emergency kitchen clients. However, a substantial number of EFAS households do not receive food stamps, though they appear to be eligible for them.

Keywords: Emergency food, food pantry, soup kitchen, community kitchen, emergency kitchen, food bank, emergency food organization, hunger, food insecurity, food security, food assistance, faith-based organization

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Summary

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 help meet the food needs of the low-income population. To better understand the EFAS and its interactions with Federal food assistance programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research (MPR) to conduct a national study of food pantries and emergency kitchens. This study illuminates how low-income populations use and are affected by public and private food assistance.

This report presents findings from the 2001 EFAS Client Survey, which sampled clients who received emergency food assistance from selected food pantries and emergency kitchens that participated in the 2000 EFAS Provider Survey. This national study of EFAS clients addresses limitations of previous studies, which focused on specific types of providers or specific clientele, such as the homeless.

Food pantries and emergency kitchens are important components of the EFAS because they offer community-based 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.

The EFAS interacts closely with USDA food assistance programs—administered by the Food and Nutrition Service—by providing temporary or supplemental food assistance to many of the same populations served by Federal food assistance programs. The EFAS also serves as a distribution outlet for USDA commodities, mainly through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Through TEFAP, emergency food providers receive USDA commodities to distribute to low-income households or to use in providing meals for needy people, as well as funding for administrative expenses. Most TEFAP food is distributed through the EFAS, and TEFAP commodities account for about 14 percent of all EFAS food.

Key findings from MPR's EFAS Client Survey include the following:

- Food pantries and emergency kitchens serve a diverse clientele. 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 time frame.
- 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 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 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 get food when they needed it; transportation problems are the most common contributing factor.

- Two-thirds of EFAS providers are affiliated with faith-based organizations. One in three kitchen clients and one in seven pantry clients are sometimes asked to participate in prayers or other religious activities. About 9 out of 10 said they are comfortable being asked to participate in these faith-based activities.
- Two-thirds of pantry-client households (69 percent) and nearly half of kitchen-client households (45 percent) combine private emergency food assistance with public food assistance program support. About 90 percent of pantry-client households and 82 percent of kitchen-client households are eligible for food stamps, but only 55 percent of eligible pantry-client households and 44 percent of eligible kitchen-client households received food stamps in the year prior to the interview. Uncertainty about eligibility is the most common reason for not participating.
- Almost three-fourths of EFAS households are food insecure; almost half are food insecure with hunger. 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 particularly high among kitchen-client households that participate in the Food Stamp Program (55 percent) compared with households ineligible for food stamps (26 and 32 percent for pantry- and kitchen-client households, respectively).

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 compared with the general low-income population in the United States; they report more health problems and material hardships and experience higher rates of homelessness and food insecurity with hunger. These hardships appear to be more severe for EFAS client households using two or more forms of emergency food assistance (pantries, soup kitchens, and meals at shelters) than for EFAS client households that also use public food assistance programs. Still, three-quarters of households combining public food assistance programs with EFAS services experience food insecurity. Rates of food insecurity with hunger range from one in four among pantry-client households with seniors to one in two among kitchen-client households with children and EFAS client households with no seniors and no children. These findings suggest that additional outreach may be needed from public food assistance programs and that the EFAS can play an important role in this arena to improve food assistance and related services to those in poverty and need.

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Introduction

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 help meet the food needs of the low-income population. To better understand the EFAS and its interactions with Federal food assistance programs, the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contracted with Mathematica Policy Research (MPR) to conduct a national study of food pantries and emergency kitchens.

The first part of the study, conducted in 2000, surveyed EFAS providers (Ohls et al.). The present report gives findings from the 2001 EFAS Client Survey, which sampled people who received assistance from food pantries and emergency kitchens that had participated in the provider survey. The study illuminates how the clients themselves use public and private food assistance and how it affects them. It also addresses limitations of previous studies, which focused on specific clientele, such as the homeless.

The Emergency Food Assistance System

Food pantries and emergency kitchens are important components of the EFAS because they offer community-based 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.

The EFAS interacts closely with the food assistance programs—administered by USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service—by providing temporary or supplemental food assistance to many of the same populations served by Federal food assistance programs. The largest Federal program by far is the Food Stamp Program (FSP), which enables low-income people to buy food through normal market channels. Other Federal food assistance programs are targeted at vulnerable population groups, including infants and children, women of childbearing age, and seniors. Programs for children include the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and child care and Head Start feeding programs. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is aimed at low-income pregnant or lactating women, infants, and children younger than 5. Nutrition programs for seniors include the Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP), formerly the Nutrition Program for the Elderly.

The EFAS also serves as a distribution outlet for USDA commodities, mainly through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Through TEFAP, emergency food providers receive USDA commodities to distribute to low-income households or to use for providing meals to needy people, and receive funding for administrative expenses. Most TEFAP food is distributed through the EFAS, and TEFAP commodities account for about 14 percent of all EFAS food (Ohls et al.).

Overview of Findings

Key findings from the EFAS Client Survey include the following:

- Food pantries and emergency kitchens serve a diverse clientele. About 4.3 million 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 time frame.
- 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 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 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.
- Two-thirds of EFAS providers are affiliated with faith-based organizations. One in three kitchen clients and one in seven pantry clients are asked at times to participate in prayers or other religious activities. About 9 out of 10 said they are comfortable being asked to participate in these faith-based activities.
- Two-thirds of pantry-client households (69 percent) and nearly half of kitchen-client households (45 percent) combine private emergency food assistance with public food assistance program support. About 90 percent of pantry-client households and 82 percent of kitchen-client households are eligible for food stamps, but only 55 percent of eligible pantry-client households and 44 percent of eligible kitchen-client households received food stamps in the year prior to the interview. Uncertainty about eligibility is the most common reason for not participating.
- Almost three-fourths of EFAS households are food insecure; almost half are food insecure with hunger. 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 particularly high among kitchen-client households that participate in the FSP (55 percent), compared with households ineligible for food stamps (26 percent and 32 percent for pantry- and kitchen-client households, respectively).

Study Design and Methods

The study comprises two parts—the 2000 EFAS Provider Survey and the 2001 EFAS Client Survey. The provider survey found that the EFAS includes 32,700 food pantries and 5,300 emergency kitchens.¹ The client survey was designed to meet the following research objectives:

- To describe the characteristics and food security of EFAS clients;
- To determine clients' access to and use of EFAS services and their level of satisfaction with the food; and
- To determine clients' participation in Federal programs for food assistance and other benefits.

To conduct the client survey, we selected a stratified subsample of primary sampling areas and pantries and kitchens that participated in the provider survey (representing the 48 contiguous States and the District of Columbia). Kitchens co-located with shelters (14 percent of kitchens) were excluded because the target population was clients of providers whose primary focus was to provide emergency food only, rather than shelter and food or other services.

About 16 percent of food pantries and 10 percent of kitchens were no longer in business at the time of the client survey. Kitchens that closed were more likely to be in the Northeast and co-located with a food pantry or a food rescue program (which may have continued to operate). Pantries that closed were more likely to be in the Midwest and co-located with a kitchen or a food bank (which may have continued to operate). Estimates of numbers of clients reported below (table 1) were adjusted upward to compensate for this, under the assumption that the providers leaving the system tend to be replaced by new providers over time.

A random sample of adult clients (18 and older) was chosen for each selected food pantry and emergency

¹The EFAS Provider Survey also collected information from food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations (Ohls et al.).

kitchen. To conduct interviews with EFAS clients, MPR staff was sent to the EFAS sites to sample households at selected food pantries and adult clients at selected emergency kitchens. Most interviews employed a computer-assisted telephone interview method, although in-person, hardcopy instruments were used when telephone coverage was difficult or when the interviewing volume required it. Respondents received a \$10 incentive for participating in the study. Interviews were completed with 2,397 pantry clients and 2,425 kitchen clients between August and November 2001. The overall response rates, which take into consideration provider and client nonresponse, were 70 percent for pantry clients and 77 percent for kitchen clients.

Profile of EFAS Clients

Serving a majority of EFAS clients, food pantries distribute 6 million meal equivalents per day, or 2.2 billion meal equivalents per year (Ohls et al.). In a typical month in 2001, food pantries served 4.3 million different households, comprising 12.5 million people (8 million adults and 4.5 million children younger than 18) (table 1).

Emergency kitchens provide about 173 million meals per year (Ohls et al.). About 1.1 million different people (856,000 adults and 275,000 children) visited emergency kitchens during a typical month in 2001 (table 1).

Household Composition

Almost half (45 percent) of pantry-client households include children, compared with about 20 percent of kitchen-client households (fig. 1). About 29 percent of pantry-client households consist of a single adult living alone, nearly two-thirds of whom are female. Kitchen clients typically are men living alone (38 percent) or single adults living with other adults (18 percent). About one-third of pantry households and one-fifth of kitchen households include at least one senior.

Table 1—Number of different EFAS clients served monthly, 2001

Clients	Food pantries	Emergency kitchens
	<i>Millions</i>	
Households	4.3	N/A
Total people	12.5	1.13
Adults	8.0	.86
Children	4.5	.28

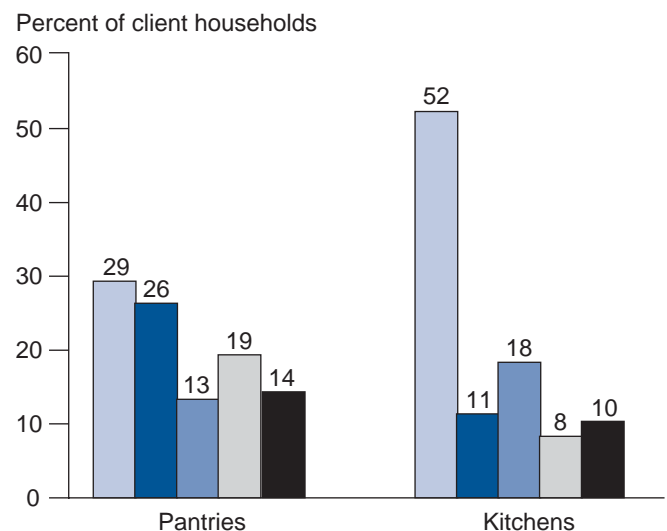
N/A = Not applicable.

Including single-person households, the average household size is 2.9 members for pantry clients and 2.1 members for kitchen clients. Overall, about one-third (34 percent) of pantry household members and one-fifth (20 percent) of kitchen household members are children younger than 18; 40 percent of these children are under 6. About 14 percent of pantry household members and 11 percent of kitchen household members are seniors.

Race/Ethnicity

Among pantry clients, about half are non-Hispanic White (49 percent) and nearly one-third are non-Hispanic Black (31 percent) (fig. 2). The reverse pattern holds for kitchen clients: Almost half are non-Hispanic Black (45 percent), and one-third are non-Hispanic White (35 percent). About 16 percent of pantry clients and 14 percent of kitchen clients are Hispanic. About 5 percent of pantry clients and 6 percent of kitchen clients are of another race/ethnicity or are multiracial.

Figure 1
Marital status and household composition of EFAS clients



Households include adults who are:

- Single living alone
- Single living with children
- Single living with other adults without children
- Married living with children
- Married living without children

Notes: Categories do not add to 100 due to rounding. Pantry-client households average 2.9 members. Kitchen-client households average 2.1 members.

U.S. Citizenship

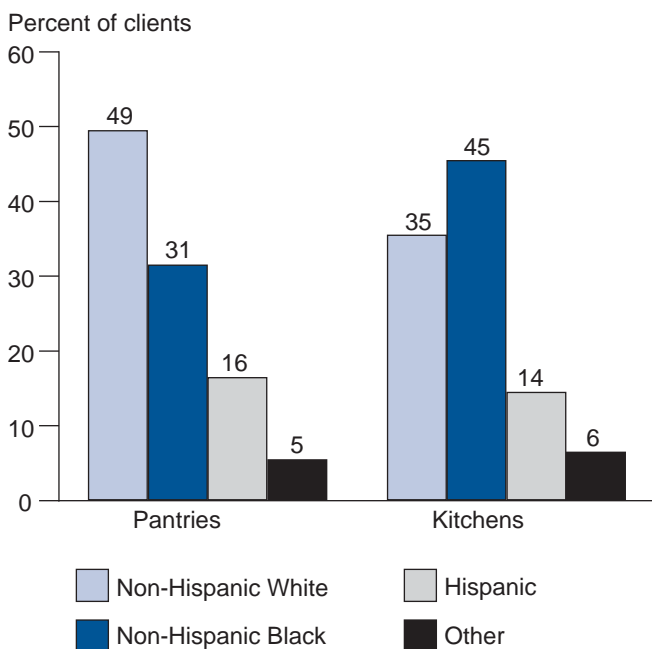
A majority of EFAS clients say that all members of their households are U.S. citizens (87 percent of pantry clients and 92 percent of kitchen clients). Only 1 percent of pantry clients and 4 percent of kitchen clients have no household members who are U.S. citizens.

Household Employment and Education Level

About one-fourth of pantry- and kitchen-client households (26 percent) include an employed person. Employment varies by household composition; households with children are more likely to have workers than other types of households. Between 40 and 50 percent of EFAS client households with children include at least one employed person, compared with 20-25 percent of households with neither children nor seniors, and with less than 15 percent of households with seniors. Among kitchen clients who are working, one-fourth have worked for more than a year. Almost 40 percent of kitchen clients and 24 percent of pantry clients are unemployed and looking for work. About 46 percent of pantry clients and 39 percent of kitchen clients have less than a high school education, a limiting factor in seeking employment (fig. 3).

Figure 2

Race/ethnicity of EFAS clients



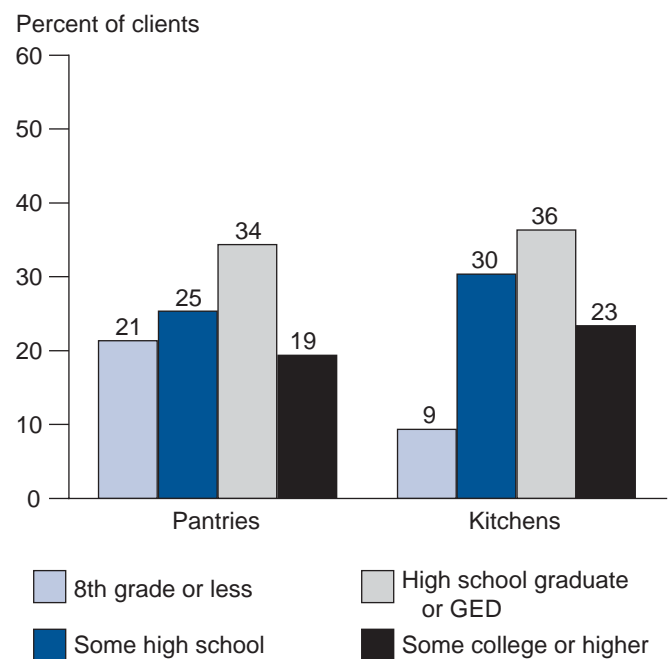
Note: Categories do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Poverty

Almost one-third of pantry-client households and two-fifths of kitchen-client households are at or below 50 percent of the poverty line (table 2). About 93 percent of pantry-client households and 86 percent of kitchen-client households have mean monthly incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level in the month before their EFAS visit, an indication they are likely to be eligible for public assistance programs. The average monthly income (for the month prior to the EFAS visit) was \$781 for pantry clients and \$708 for kitchen clients. Almost half of pantry-client households (45

Figure 3

Education level of EFAS clients



Note: About 1 percent of both pantry and kitchen clients attended trade school.

Table 2—Income and poverty characteristics of EFAS client households

Characteristics	Client households of:	
	Pantries	Kitchens
	<i>Percent</i>	
Annual household income #50% of poverty	32	43
Household receives cash welfare	45	34
Mean monthly household income #130% of poverty	93	86
	<i>Dollars</i>	
Mean household monthly income	781	708

percent) and one-third of kitchen-client households (34 percent) received cash welfare assistance.²

Material Hardships

In addition to poverty, EFAS clients experience such problems as homelessness or lack of transportation or working telephones. In general, kitchen clients experience more severe hardships than pantry clients. About 36 percent of kitchen-client and 8 percent of pantry-client households are homeless, with limited or no access to facilities to prepare, store, or cook meals (fig. 4).³

²Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or general assistance (GA).

³Homeless respondents were those who indicated that they lived in locations not intended for permanent housing, such as shelters/missions, cars/vans, abandoned buildings, public spaces, or outdoors, or who said that they considered themselves homeless.

About half of kitchen clients do not have a working telephone, and three-quarters do not have a working vehicle. One-fourth of pantry clients do not have a working telephone, and half do not have a working vehicle.

Food Insecurity

About three-fourths of EFAS clients are classified as food insecure, and almost half are food insecure with hunger (fig. 5).⁴ In contrast, the 2001 national estimate of food insecurity with hunger is 11 percent of all households and 32 percent of low-income households (Nord et al.).⁵ Two in five kitchen-client households

⁴Food security was assessed using the six-item short form (Blumberg et al.; Bickel et al.).

⁵Based on the December 2001 Current Population Survey, which does not survey the homeless or tenuously housed. Low-income is defined as at or below 130 percent of the poverty line.

Figure 4
Residential status of EFAS clients

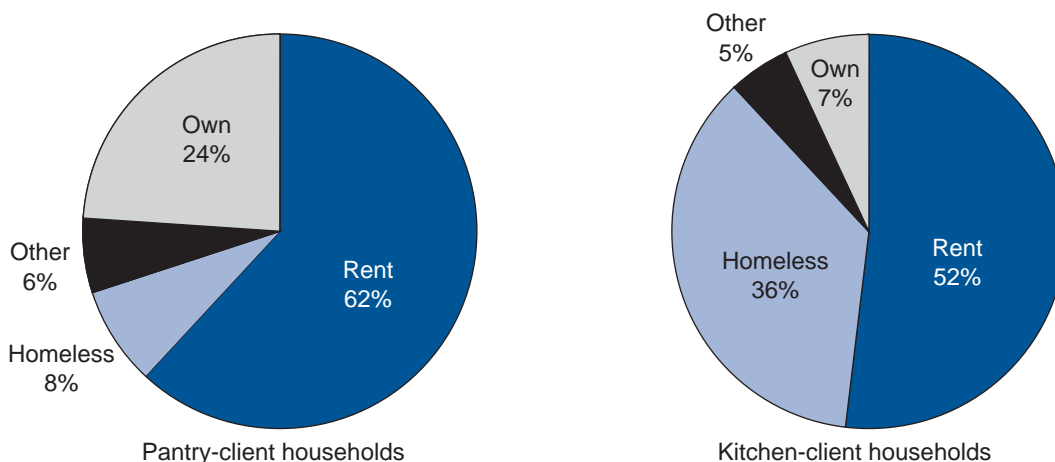
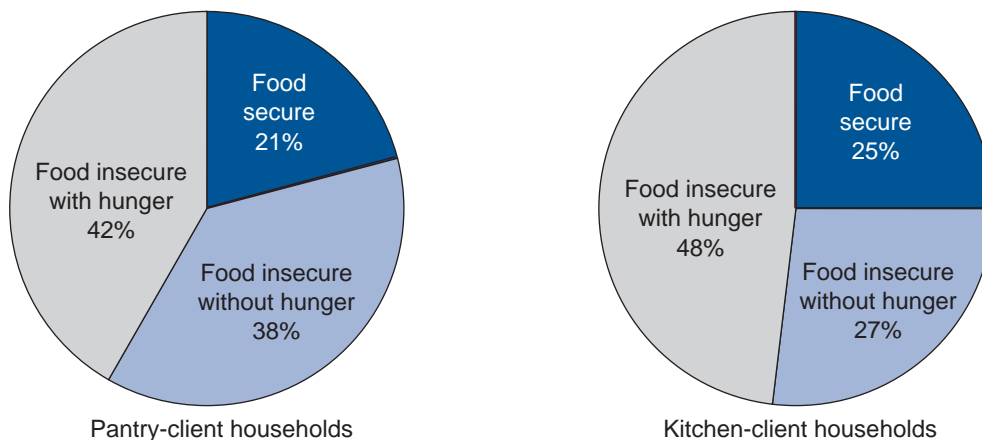


Figure 5
Food security status of EFAS clients



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

and one in four pantry-client households said an adult in the household did not eat for an entire day at some point in the last year because there was not enough food or enough money to buy food.

Food insecurity is common among households that visit pantries or kitchens, but the prevalence and severity vary by household composition and the type of provider. Food insecurity ranges from 66 percent of kitchen-client households with seniors and no children to 87 percent of pantry-client households with adults only (and no seniors) (fig. 6). Food insecurity with hunger ranges from 25 percent of pantry-client households with seniors and no children to 58 percent of pantry-client households with adults only (no seniors and no children). EFAS households with seniors and no children are more likely to be food secure than are other household types.

Using and Accessing EFAS Services

The most frequent reason for seeking emergency food assistance is having a low income (more than 90 percent of pantry households and 84 percent of kitchen households), due to low wages or a fixed income.

About three-fourths of pantry clients and 69 percent of kitchen clients said they prefer to get food from a pantry or kitchen instead of asking the Government for help

(although many of these households also report relying on Federal assistance). About 36 percent of pantry clients and 41 percent of kitchen clients report problems with food stamps or welfare as a factor in visiting an EFAS provider.

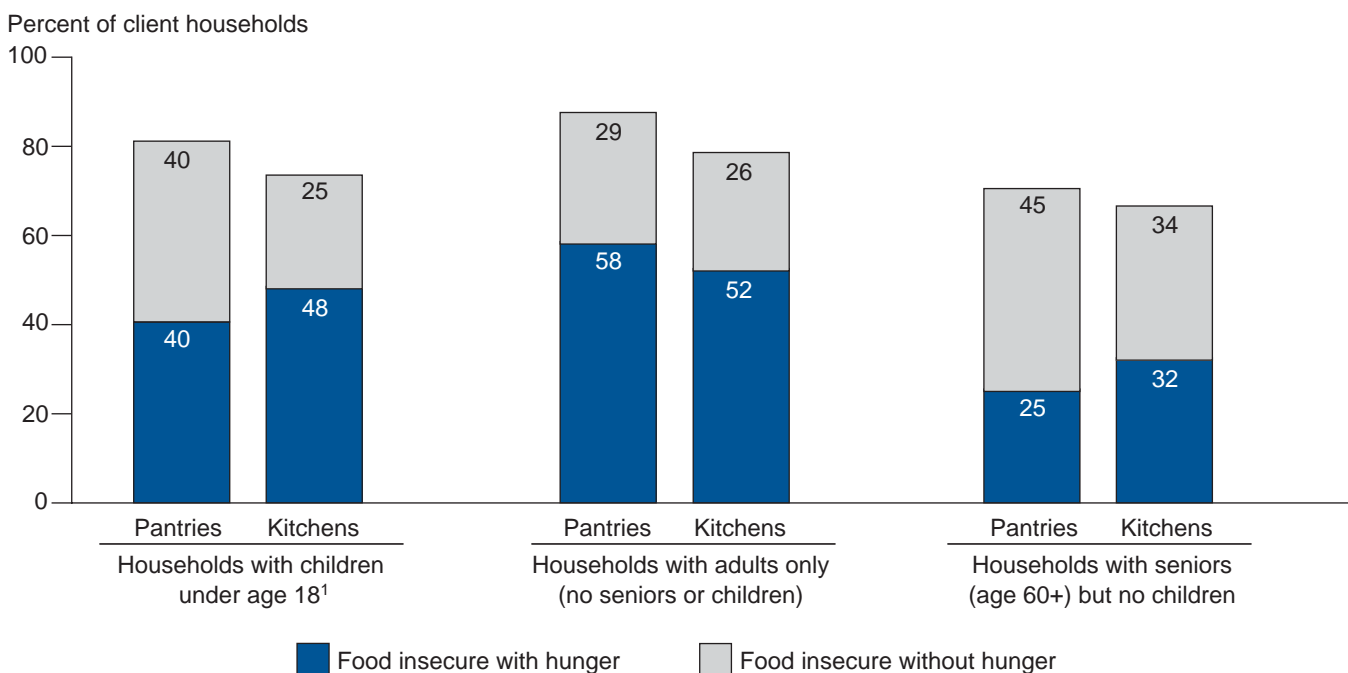
Health or personal problems contribute to the need for emergency food assistance. About half of pantry clients and two-fifths of kitchen clients report being in “fair or poor health” compared with one-third of the general low-income population (Pamuk et al.). Poor health or disability could weaken efforts to get emergency food assistance, but apparently this is offset by a need for food. Health problems may indicate an even greater need for adequate nutrition. Based on the EFAS Provider Survey, almost one-fourth of pantries and kitchens provide nutrition counseling or education (Ohls et al.). A smaller proportion provide health services (11 percent of pantries and 20 percent of kitchens).

Frequency of Visits to Providers

About half of pantry-client households (55 percent) visit a pantry once a month or less, most likely because providers restrict the frequency of visits rather than because the clients have limited needs (fig. 7).⁶ About

⁶Two-thirds of pantries restrict visits to once a month or less (Ohls et al.).

Figure 6
Food insecurity and hunger of EFAS clients by household type



¹Fourteen percent of pantry-client households with children and 13 percent of kitchen-client households with children also have seniors.

one-fourth of clients report visiting two or three times a month, and one-fifth visit once a week or more. About 40 percent made pantry visits in 10 to 12 months of the previous year. About 30 percent made visits in 1 to 3 months, indicating that they were new or infrequent users or that the pantries they visited were open infrequently.

About 13 percent of kitchen clients received meals nearly every day (6 or 7 days) during the week of the interview. Another 43 percent received meals from an emergency kitchen on 2 to 5 days during the week. About 58 percent of clients visited kitchens for 1 month or less for the current use “episode,” and 16 percent visited kitchens for more than 1 year.⁷ One-quarter of kitchen clients visited the kitchen nearly daily; most of these clients relied on the kitchen for multiple months, some for years.

Provider Location and Barriers to Access

Food pantries in metropolitan areas serve two-thirds (69 percent) of all pantry-client households, whereas emergency kitchens in metropolitan areas serve 88 percent of all kitchen clients. Transportation problems are a barrier for pantry and kitchen clients. About one-fifth of pantry clients (22 percent) and almost one-third of kitchen clients (30 percent) reported that they had trouble getting food at some time in the last 12 months. Among clients who had difficulty, the main reason was poor transportation, reported by 30 percent of pantry clients and 25 percent of kitchen clients (or 6 percent and 8 percent of all pantry and kitchen clients, respec-

tively). Other problems reported by pantry clients included providers running out of food (11 percent of those reporting a difficulty) and the client arriving late (10 percent) or coming too often (9 percent).⁸ Kitchen clients reported the same “other” (nontransportation) problems with access as pantry clients: arriving late (25 percent, or about 8 percent of all kitchen clients) and provider running out of food (21 percent of those reporting a difficulty, or 6 percent of all kitchen clients). These numbers are probably low estimates of potential clients with limited access to the EFAS because they do not take into account individuals who live in areas without access to kitchens or pantries.

Client Satisfaction

Overall, client satisfaction with the food received at emergency kitchens and food pantries is high. About 9 out of 10 EFAS clients say they are “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the amount and variety of food at pantries and kitchens.

Faith-Based Activities

Providers with a formal religious affiliation serve three-fifths of EFAS clients.⁹ One-third of kitchen clients and one-seventh of pantry clients are sometimes asked to participate in prayers or other religious activities. About 9 out of 10 clients who said they had been asked to participate in these activities report being comfortable doing so (fig. 8).

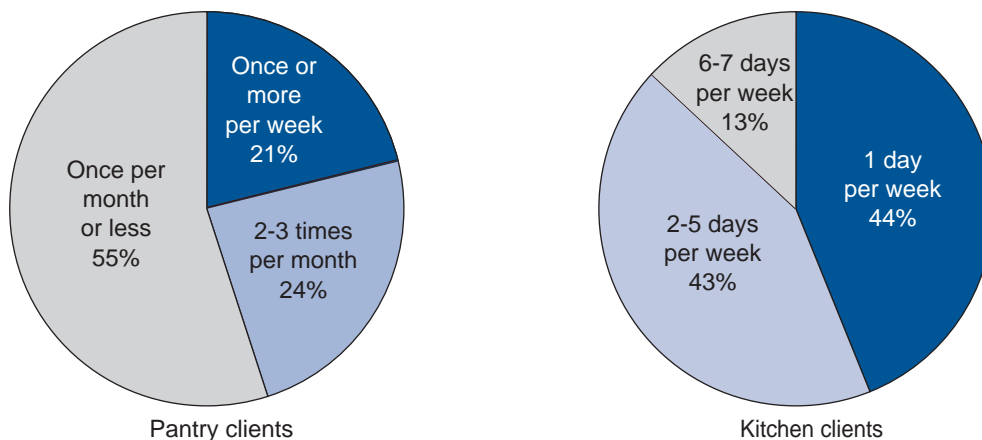
⁷An “episode” is defined as consecutive weekly use of one or more kitchens.

⁸These estimates translate to about 2 percent of all pantry clients reporting such difficulties.

⁹Two-thirds of EFAS providers are affiliated with faith-based organizations (Ohls et al.).

Figure 7

Frequency of visits to EFAS providers



Note: Reported frequency of visits in the last year for pantry clients and in the past week for kitchen clients.

Multiple Sources of Emergency Food Assistance

More than three-fourths of EFAS clients seek food assistance from other sources, private and/or public, in addition to pantries or kitchens (fig. 9).¹⁰ About 19 percent of pantry-client households received meals from emergency kitchens and 12 percent used shelters in the year before visiting a pantry, indicating overlap in kitchen and pantry clientele. About one-third of kitchen-client households use two or more types of private providers (pantries, kitchens, and/or shelters), with no public food program assistance. About 45 percent use shelters, 37 percent visit food pantries, and 18 percent use nontraditional sources of food, such as restaurant handouts and trashcans, reflecting a high proportion of homeless kitchen clientele.¹¹

Pantry-client households were more likely than kitchen-client households to have participated in public food assistance programs (69 percent vs. 45 percent) in the last year in addition to private food assistance.¹²

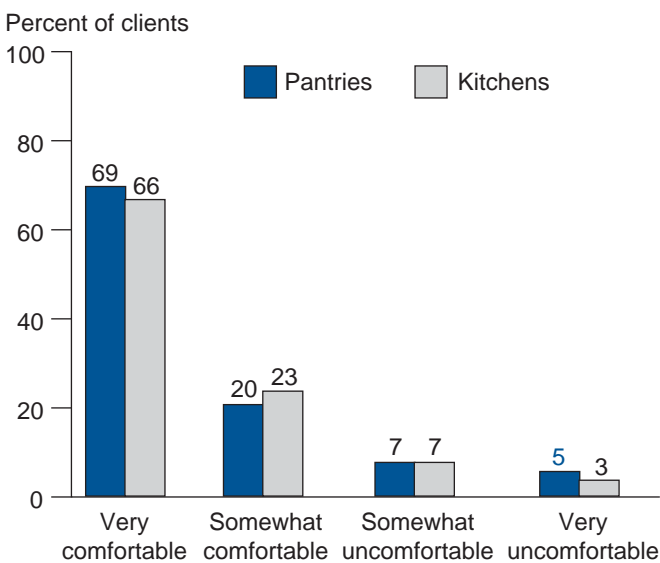
¹⁰“Private” is used to distinguish EFAS providers from “public” or Federal food assistance programs. Private EFAS providers rely on public support such as USDA commodities and TEFAP funds for administrative expenses.

¹¹Food from relatives, friends, and neighbors was not included as a food source in the survey because of time limitations.

¹²The study asked about participation in one or more of seven public food assistance programs: FSP, WIC, NSLP, SBP, SFSP, NSIP, and child care feeding programs, such as Head Start.

Figure 8

Comfort level with religious activities among EFAS clients asked to participate¹



¹Fourteen percent of pantry clients and 34 percent of kitchen clients are sometimes asked to participate in prayers or other religious activities.

This finding is related to the higher proportion of household members who are eligible for one or more public food assistance programs in pantry-client households compared with kitchen-client households. (Pantry-client households are more likely to include children, women of childbearing age, and seniors than kitchen-client households.)

Participation in Public Food Assistance Programs

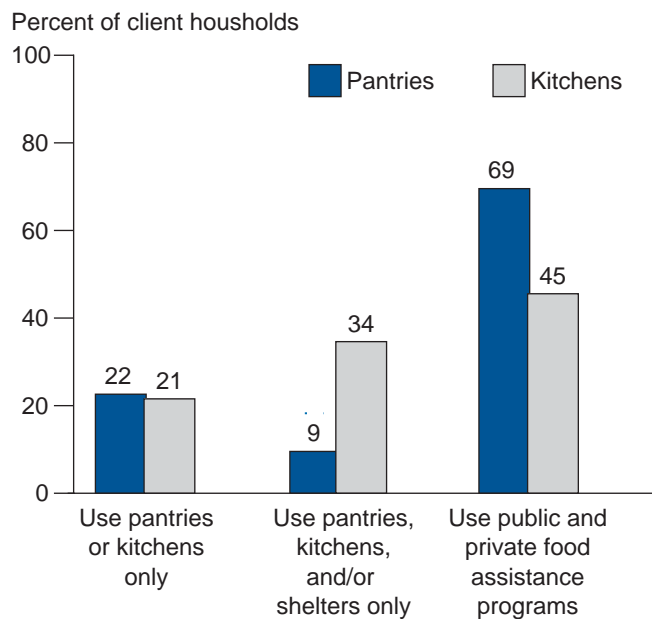
Several Federal food assistance programs can provide important sources of food for low-income households. Although the U.S. Congress budgeted \$37 billion for domestic nutrition programs in fiscal year 2002 (USDA Office of Budget and Program Analysis), these programs do not appear to serve all the food needs of low-income individuals. For a variety of reasons, many low-income or otherwise needy people turn to private organizations for short- or long-term food assistance, either in addition to, or instead of, participation in public nutrition programs.

Eligibility

Household composition and income were used to determine clients' eligibility for public food assistance programs (fig. 10). More than 90 percent of EFAS client households are eligible for food stamps. Among pantry-client households, about 40 percent are eligible for child

Figure 9

Food assistance program participation of EFAS client households



nutrition programs (SBP, NSLP, and SFSP), 22 percent are eligible for Head Start or a similar child care feeding program, 21 percent for WIC, and 32 percent for senior meal programs. Eligibility for child nutrition programs, WIC, and senior programs is substantially lower among kitchen-client households, which often include a single male living alone or with other adults.

Federal Programs

About 69 percent of all pantry-client households received assistance from at least one Federal food assistance program, and 36 percent received assistance from two or more such programs in the past year, compared with 45 percent and 15 percent of all kitchen-client households, respectively. Although EFAS households participate in the FSP more than in any other food assistance program, only 48 percent of all pantry-client households and 36 percent of all kitchen-client households received food stamps in the year before the interview.

Food Stamp Program

The FSP is the largest of the public food assistance programs, and, as noted, the one in which EFAS clients participate most frequently. The FSP is the public food

assistance program with the broadest eligibility standards, as reflected in the fact that more EFAS clients (9 out of 10 pantry clients and 8 out of 10 kitchen clients) are eligible for the FSP than any other public food assistance program. Nevertheless, only half (55 percent) of eligible pantry-client households and 44 percent of eligible kitchen-client households received food stamps in the year before the interview (fig. 11).^{13, 14}

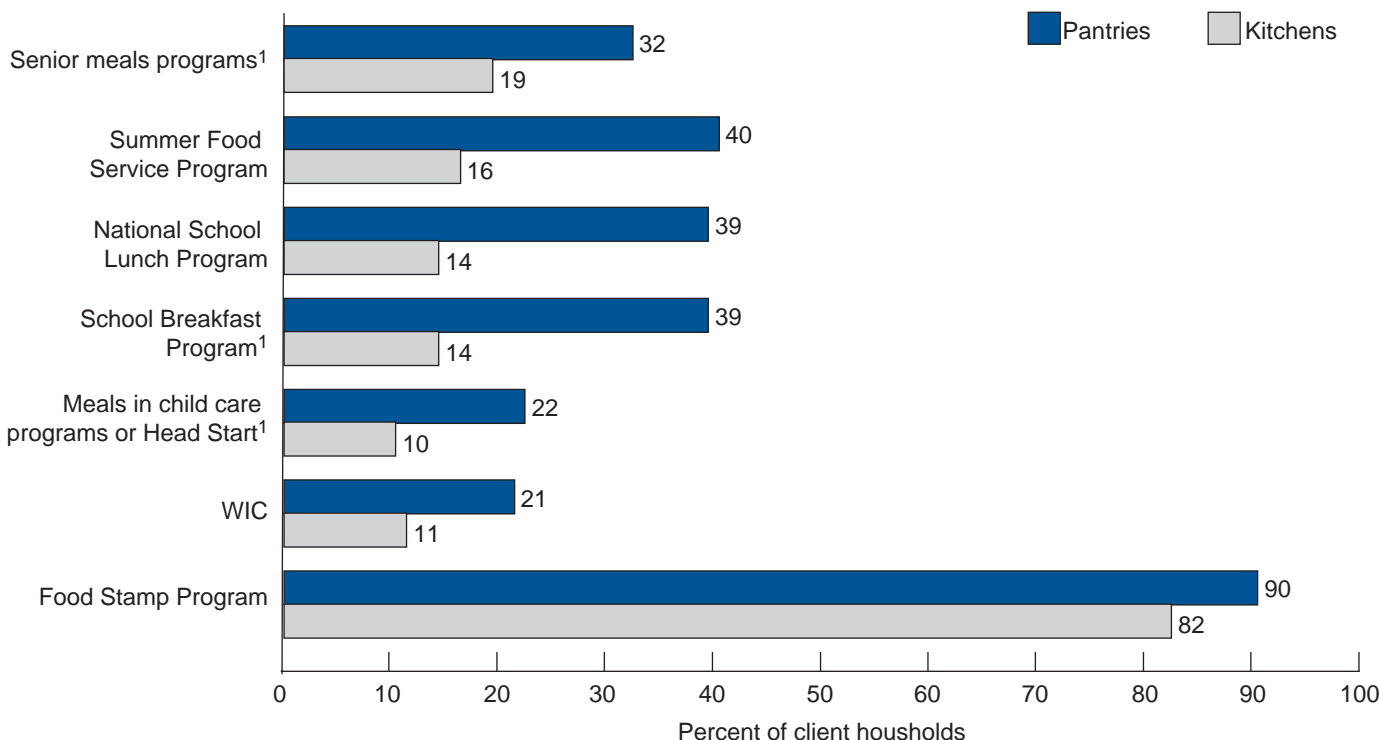
Among eligible households with no FSP participation in the last year, 7 percent of pantry-client households and 12 percent of kitchen-client households that applied for food stamps in the last year were turned down. About half of these households plan to reapply for FSP benefits. When asked what barriers they faced in applying for or receiving food stamps, nearly half of pantry clients (47 percent) and more than one-third of kitchen clients (36 percent) doubted their eligibility. Other reasons given by pantry clients were a preference for non-Government help (9 percent), the small size of the

¹³The nationwide FSP participation rate is 59 percent in 2000 (Cunnyngnam 2002).

¹⁴At the time of the interview, 44 percent of eligible pantry client households and 30 percent of eligible kitchen client households were receiving food stamps.

Figure 10

Eligibility of EFAS client households for public food assistance programs



¹Program not available in all areas.

benefits (8 percent), and the paperwork burden (8 percent). Other reasons given by kitchen clients included not knowing how to get benefits (12 percent) and a preference for non-Government help (11 percent).

Among kitchen-client households that participated in the FSP during the prior year but not at the time of the interview, nearly half (46 percent) cited failure to comply with work requirements as the reason they were turned down for benefits. Among pantry-client households with former FSP participation, only 8 percent gave this as the reason they were turned down. Thus, it appears the work requirements connected to the FSP affect adult kitchen clients to a larger extent than pantry-client households. This is because the food stamp-related work requirements only apply to able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), and a high proportion of kitchen clients live alone and do not have dependents.

Child Nutrition Programs

Among eligible EFAS client households, participation rates are highest for the free and reduced-price school meals programs (84 and 80 percent for the NSLP for pantry- and kitchen-client households, respectively, and 73 and 71 percent for the SBP). These rates are followed

by rates for WIC (61 and 53 percent), and the SFSP (21 and 31 percent). Participation rates are lowest (19 percent) for Head Start or other child care feeding programs for households with children (see fig. 11).

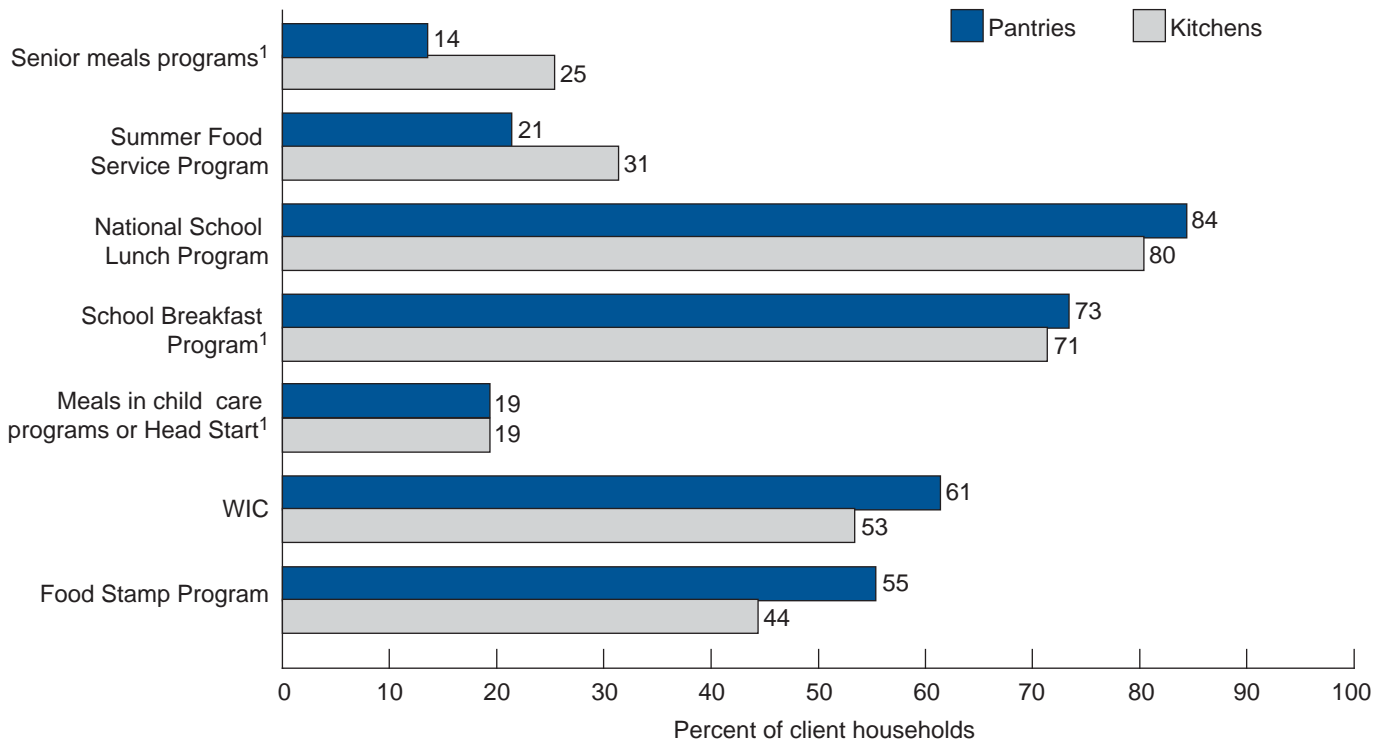
For the NSLP, the most common reason for nonparticipation cited by clients with eligible household members is doubt about eligibility (cited by 23 percent of pantry-client households and 24 percent of kitchen clients). For WIC, doubt about eligibility was cited by 56 percent of pantry clients and 48 percent of kitchen clients with eligible household members. The SBP is not available in all areas, but participation rates for school breakfast programs are close to those for school lunches. The most common reason reported for not participating in the SBP is that children are eating breakfast at home. The most common reason for not participating in the SFSP is being unaware of the program, which is not available in all areas.

Senior Nutrition Programs

Among eligible households, only 14 percent of pantry-client households and 25 percent of kitchen-client households participate in senior meals programs, which are not available in all areas of the country (see fig. 11).

Figure 11

Participation by eligible EFAS client households in public food assistance programs



¹Program not available in all areas.

Implications for Policymaking and Research

Low-income individuals and families use a variety of coping strategies to meet their food needs. Some households use only pantries or kitchens, some use two or more sources of private food assistance (pantries, kitchens, and/or shelters), and many use a combination of private and public assistance. About two-thirds of EFAS clients prefer private food assistance to help from a Government program, yet the majority also participate in public food assistance programs. Among pantry and kitchen households eligible for one or more of seven public food assistance programs, three-fourths participate in at least one program and half participate in two or more (fig. 12).

Household Type and Food Assistance

The EFAS serves a diverse clientele, yet common patterns emerge in food assistance, with implications for nutrition policy and further research.

Households With Children

Nearly half (45 percent) of pantry-client households and 20 percent of kitchen-client households include children. These households are more likely to rely on public food assistance programs in addition to assistance from pantries or kitchens (figs. 13 and 14). Households with children are more likely to have been in extreme poverty (income less than 50 percent of the poverty level) in the past year and more likely to rely on cash welfare compared with households with neither children nor seniors. Households with children also experience high rates of food insecurity with hunger (40 percent of pantry clients and 48 percent of kitchen clients).

Households With Seniors

Twenty-five percent of pantry-client households and 17 percent of kitchen-client households include seniors but no children. Compared with other pantry-household types, households with seniors are more likely to rely only on pantries (fig. 13) and to be homeowners. About half of pantry- and kitchen-client households with seniors combine private and public food assistance programs (figs. 13 and 14). One-fourth of kitchen-client households with seniors (28 percent) use two or more sources of private food assistance and no public food assistance. Households with seniors are the least likely to be classified as food insecure with hunger compared with households with children and those with adults only and no seniors (see fig. 6).

Households With Neither Children Nor Seniors

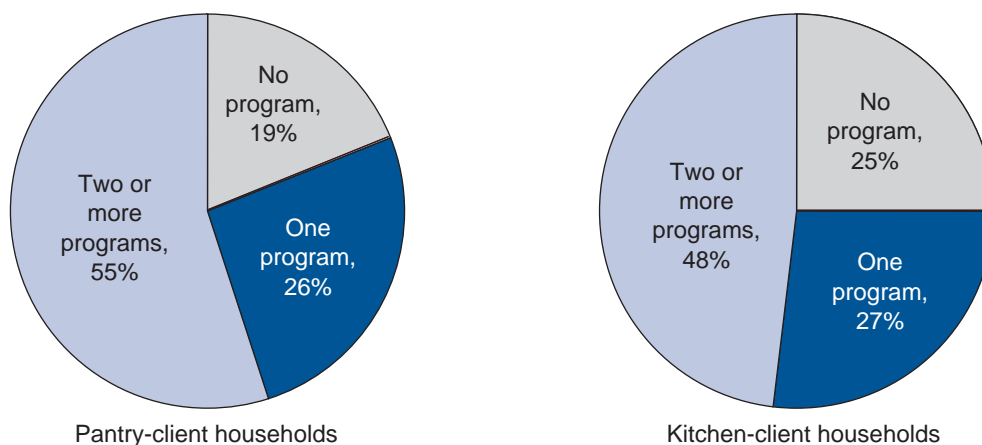
These comprise nearly one-third of pantry-client households (30 percent) and nearly two-thirds of kitchen-client households (63 percent). Among pantry clients, 51 percent of households with neither children nor seniors combine private food assistance with public program support (fig. 13). Among kitchen clients, 43 percent of households with neither children nor seniors rely on kitchens, pantries, and meals at shelters, with no public food assistance (fig. 14). This finding is consistent with the higher prevalence of homelessness among this group of kitchen clients.

Food Insecurity and Hunger: Correlation With Food Assistance

The prevalence of food insecurity is highly correlated with participation in EFAS and public food assistance

Figure 12

Participation among eligible EFAS client households in public food assistance programs



programs (fig. 15). Material hardships are more severe for EFAS client households using two or more sources of EFAS—food pantries, soup kitchens, or meals served at shelters—with no public food assistance programs than for EFAS client households using both private and public assistance.

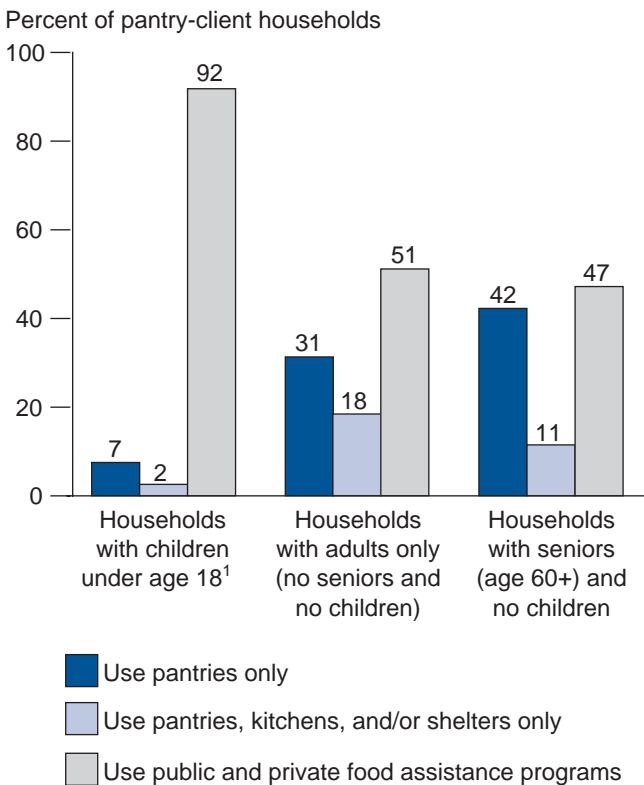
Households using two or more forms of private food assistance and no public food assistance are more likely to be homeless than other client households. These same households are more likely to be food insecure with hunger. For pantry- and kitchen-client households using two or more forms of EFAS (and no public support), more than half (55 percent) are food insecure with hunger (fig. 15). In comparison, food insecurity with hunger is somewhat less prevalent (43 percent) among pantry-client households using public and private food assistance programs, and substantially less prevalent (at 35 and 28 percent, respectively) among households using pantries or kitchens only, with no public food assistance.

The rates of food insecurity with hunger are similar for FSP participants and other eligible households not participating in the FSP (fig. 16). The rates are lower for EFAS client households ineligible for food stamps because of higher income levels and resources, yet one-fourth of FSP-ineligible pantry-client households and one-third of FSP-ineligible kitchen-client households are classified as food insecure with hunger.

Client households using either food pantries or emergency kitchens, but no other forms of EFAS or public food assistance, often indicate higher levels of income and lower levels of poverty than other client households. This finding is consistent with the fact that most of the public food assistance programs are means-tested. Households with relatively high levels of income (above 130 percent of the poverty level) are likely to be ineligible for certain programs, such as the FSP.

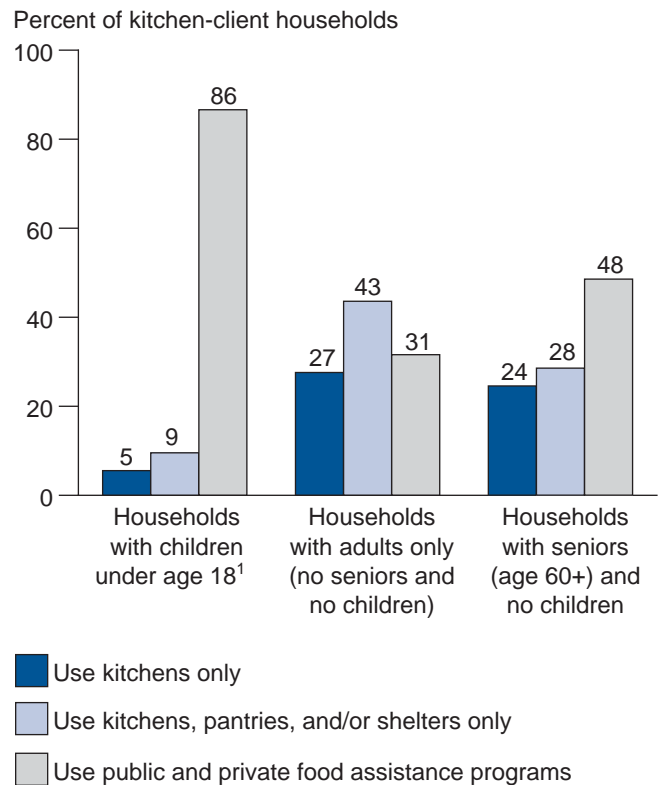
Because three-fifths of pantry-client households and four-fifths of kitchen-client households using two or more forms of EFAS have neither children nor seniors,

Figure 13
Participation of EFAS pantry-client households in food assistance programs by demographic group



Note: Categories may not add to 100 due to rounding. Categories are mutually exclusive.
¹Fourteen percent of pantry-client households with children also have seniors.

Figure 14
Participation of EFAS kitchen-client households in food assistance programs by demographic group



Note: Categories may not add to 100 due to rounding. Categories are mutually exclusive.
¹Thirteen percent of kitchen-client households with children also have seniors.

the public food assistance program for which these households are most likely to be eligible is the FSP. At least four-fifths of pantry and kitchen households using two or more forms of EFAS (pantries, kitchens, and/or shelters) appear to be eligible for the FSP. However, these eligible households are twice as likely to believe they are ineligible for food stamps as eligible households

using public food assistance programs. Consequently, expanding awareness of FSP eligibility may be a key to increasing food stamp participation and decreasing hunger among the highly disadvantaged households that seek food from two or more forms of emergency food assistance.

Figure 15

Food insecurity and hunger in EFAS client households by food assistance program participation

Percent of client households

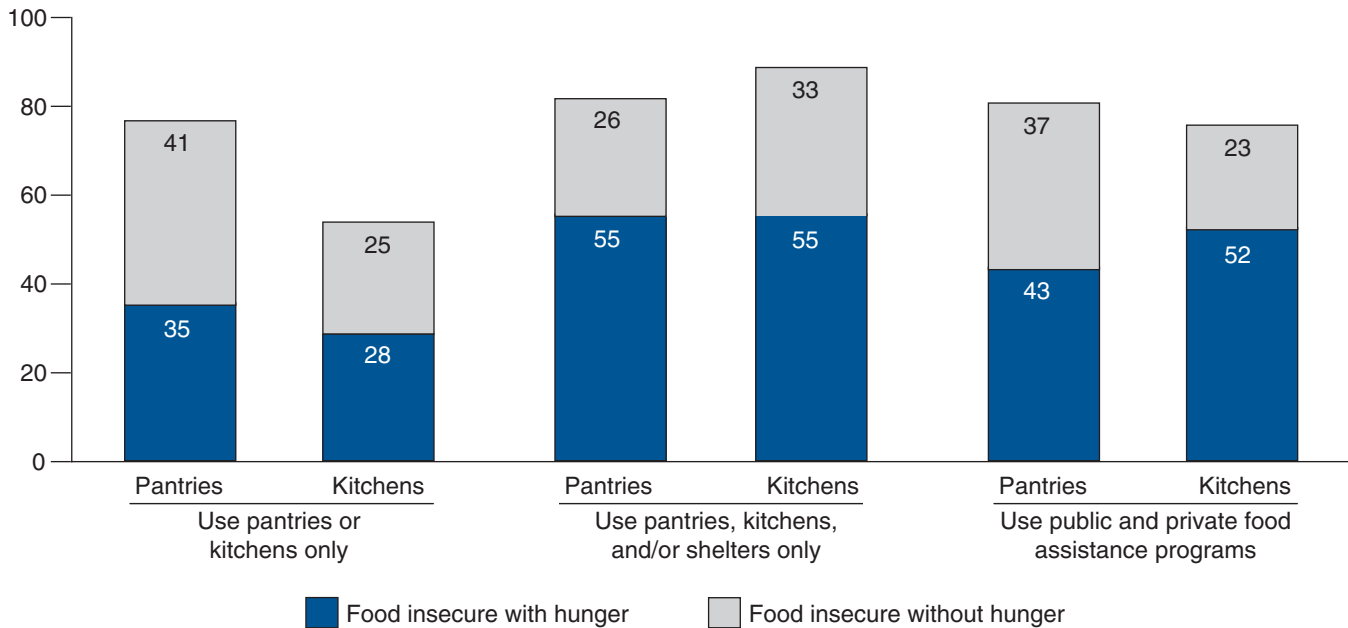
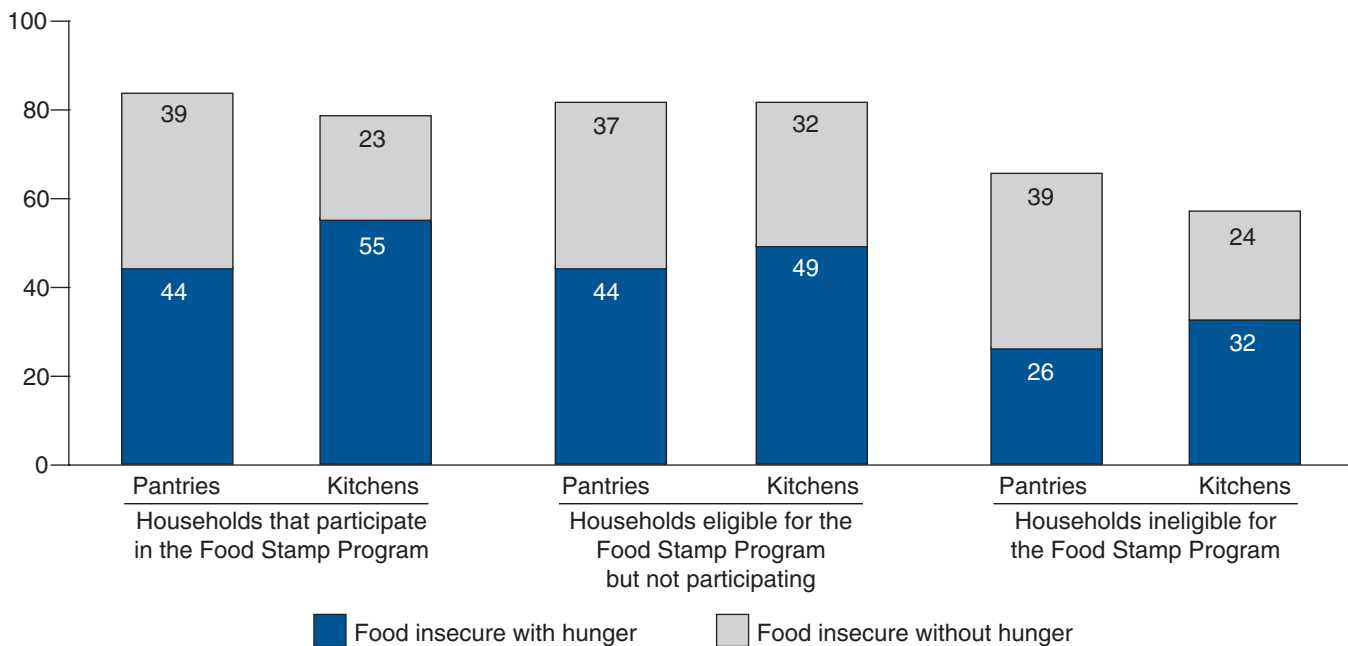


Figure 16

Food insecurity and hunger among EFAS client households by participation in the Food Stamp Program

Percent of client households



Improving Participation in Public Food Assistance Programs

If policymakers want to increase participation of eligible EFAS clients in Government food assistance programs, the following changes might help:

- Making it easier for low-income individuals to determine if they are, in fact, eligible for Government food assistance—for instance, expanding outreach efforts within EFAS pantries and kitchens, where only one in six providers now offers FSP- or WIC-related eligibility counseling (Ohls et al.).
- Combining EFAS provider data with client data to further study—
 - Interrelationships between frequency and duration of EFAS use, client characteristics, and provider characteristics, for example, EFAS provider services such as counseling and referrals to public food assistance programs.
 - Effects of the FSP’s work requirements on clients’ needs for and use of emergency food assistance.

Public-use versions of the EFAS survey data, which ERS plans to provide, will allow researchers to pursue these and other topics relevant to policy questions.

Conclusions

The EFAS serves the needs of a large number 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 greater difficulties than the general low-income population in the United States—they report more health problems and material hardships and have higher rates of homelessness and food insecurity with hunger. These problems appear to be more severe for EFAS client households using two or more forms of emergency food assistance (pantries, soup kitchens, and meals at shelters) than for EFAS client households that also use public food assistance programs. Still, three-quarters of households combining public food assistance programs with EFAS services experience food insecurity. Rates of food insecurity with hunger range from one in four among pantry-client households with seniors, to one in two among kitchen-client households with children and EFAS client households with no seniors and no children.

These findings suggest that stronger outreach efforts may be needed from public food assistance programs, and that the EFAS can play an important role in this arena to improve food assistance and related services to those in need.

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