

COMBATING HUNGER – IV

EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC, PRIVATE FOOD ASSISTANCE

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Much discussion about food assistance focuses on Food Stamps. For example, as of January 2002, the Washington, D.C.-based think tank Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) listed over 90 major studies on the Food Stamp Program, and has added more in the last three years. Private assistance also has a role in combating hunger, however. This fact sheet reviews research on the interaction and effectiveness of both public and private food assistance offered through Emergency Food Providers (EFPs).

HUNGRY PEOPLE USE BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ASSISTANCE

■ The public and private sectors are intertwined. Some evidence suggests many who once could feed their households with the help of Food Stamps “have been drawn to the charitable food sector, either to supplement an increasingly inadequate allotment or to compensate for losing eligibility altogether.”¹

■ There is growing evidence that Food Stamp recipients are not finding enough assistance to meet their household needs, and are turning to the private, nonprofit sector as a supplement as a result.^{2,3}

■ A recent study in the Kansas City metropolitan area found that between 1998-2001, almost 60 percent of food pantry recipients also received Food Stamps at some time. Just over one-third of Food Stamp clients also visited a pantry. “The data suggest that households are not substituting one form of assistance for the other but rather are accessing multiple types of assistance when necessary.”⁴

■ Use of both public and private sources of food assistance is not consistent. Some beneficiaries prefer one over the other. A study of single mothers using pantries in Wisconsin in 1999 showed most of these mothers use food pantries as an alternative, rather than a supplement, to Food Stamps, despite appearing to meet Food Stamp income criteria. “Concurrent Food Stamp use is more common among mothers with weaker employment ties, more recent welfare involvement, and residence in a county that experienced smaller Food Stamp caseload declines in the welfare reform years.”⁵

■ In 2001, the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that about one-fourth of those who left the Food Stamp Program said they turned to a food pantry or soup kitchen in the past year for assistance.⁶

■ Many who leave welfare find themselves in low-wage jobs, and use Food Stamps to help maintain the household. They typically work 35 hours per week at \$6.50 per hour, and remain eligible for about \$200 a month in Food Stamps for a family of three.⁷

WHEN FOOD ASSISTANCE BECOMES A STATE AND LOCAL POLICY ISSUE

■ “If households are simply receiving food assistance from private rather than public sources, then the burden of food provision has genuinely shifted to the local level.”⁸

■ Anecdotal evidence suggests private food assistance relies on local donations and government support. If local food pantries and other aid are substituting for or even supplementing the federal program, the burden has switched not just from the national to local level, but also from the federal government to local government. Local government traditionally has had less fiscal flexibility than the federal government, leaving local food programs more vulnerable in times of need.

■ Reliance on local level responses to society-wide policy problems can lead to stark differences in government response, resulting in reinforcing inequality.

This is one in a series of fact sheets about hunger and food assistance from University of Northern Iowa Professor Maureen Berner for the Iowa Fiscal Partnership (IFP). The IFP is on the web at www.iowafiscal.org.

PROVIDING ADEQUATE AND BALANCED FOOD SUPPLIES

- Researchers have found that Food Stamps are much more meaningful in terms of assuring adequate food supplies in households than food pantries.⁹⁻¹⁰
- Even with Food Stamps, poorer elderly women have a lower level of nutritional adequacy than those with a higher income.
- Food Stamps can reduce income and food consumption volatility.¹¹
- Food pantries, while trying to provide a balanced selection of foods, are limited by partial reliance on in-kind donations of products. That is, the pantries distribute the food they have available. The difference can be stark: Few pantries can gather or distribute a variety of fresh fruits or vegetables. Pantries rely primarily on food that has shelf life. Food Stamps can be used by recipients to buy fresh products in the store. A reduction in Food Stamps and greater reliance on just private assistance mean fewer options, less diversity and potentially worse nutrition.
- A study of Food Stamp recipients in four counties in Iowa found that families on Food Stamps ate less, and ate less fresh fruit and vegetables, less meat and of a lower quality than desired.¹² Families also were more concerned about children having enough and feeling full than to have “healthy” diets.

CAPACITY TO HANDLE INCREASED DEMAND FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE

- While there seems to be some evidence that demand is increasing, and that demand may be leading to an increase in supply of EFPs, that supply may have limited capacity.
- Private, nonprofit food assistance relies in part on significant levels of volunteer labor, which may be less reliable or consistent. Nationally, there is a shortage of volunteer labor.
- Research and reports from EFPs nationally indicate that these nonprofits did not have the capacity to provide stable, long-term support for the hungry.¹³⁻¹⁴

¹ Eisinger, P. (2000). *The quality of mercy: On the capacity of the nonprofit emergency food system in Detroit*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University. p.2.

² Eisinger, P. (1999). Food pantries and welfare reform: Estimating the effect. *Focus*, 20(3), 23-28.

³ Daponte, B. (2000, April). Private versus public relief: Utilization of food pantries versus Food Stamps among poor households. *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 32(2), 72-83.

⁴ Mosley, J. and Tiehen, L. (2004, June). The food safety net after welfare reform: Use of private and public food assistance in the Kansas City metropolitan area. *Social Services Review* 78(2), p. 267-83

⁵ Bartfeld, Judi. Single Mothers, Emergency Food Assistance and Food Stamps in the Welfare Reform Era. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, vol. 37 n. 2 (winter 2003) 283-304.

⁶ Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2001). *The decline in Food Stamp participation: A report to congress*. Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Department of Agriculture.

⁷ Rosenbaum, D., & Super, D. (2005). Summary of Report. *The Food Stamp Program: Working smarter for working families*. (Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities) Found 4/26/05 at <http://www.cbpp.org/3-15-05fa.htm>.

⁸ Daponte, B. (2000, April). Private versus public relief: Utilization of food pantries versus Food Stamps among poor households. *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 32(2), p. 73.

⁹ Daponte, B., Sanders, S., & Taylor, L. (1999). Why do low-income households now use Food Stamps? Evidence from an experiment. *Journal of Human Resources*, 34(3), 612-628.

¹⁰ Daponte, B., Haviland, A., & Kadane, J. (2001). *To what degree does food assistance help poor households acquire enough food?* (JCPR Working Paper No. 236). Chicago: Joint Center for Poverty Research, Northwestern University/University of Chicago.

¹¹ Gundersen, C. & Ziliak, J.P. (2003) The role of Food Stamps in consumption stabilization. *Journal of Human Resources* 38 (Supplement 2003): 1051-79.

¹² Greder, K., Garasky, S., Jensen, H., & Morton, L., 2002. *Iowa Food Security Report Card, Project Final Report*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University.

¹³ Eisinger, P. (2000). *The quality of mercy: On the capacity of the nonprofit emergency food system in Detroit*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University.

¹⁴ Venner, S.H., Sullivan, A.F., & Seavey, D. (2000, January). *Paradox of our times: Hunger in a strong economy*. Medford, MA: Center on Hunger and Poverty, Tufts University.