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The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey

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Abstract

Findings of the first comprehensive government study of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) suggest that public and private food assistance may work in tandem to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide by itself. Five major types of organizations (emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations) operate in the EFAS. About 5,300 emergency kitchens provide more than 173 million meals a year, and 32,700 food pantries distribute about 2.9 billion pounds of food a year, which translates into roughly 2,200 million meals. Despite substantial amounts of food distributed by the system, the EFAS remains much smaller in scale than the Federal programs. This study, which was sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service, provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of the five types of organizations. This report provides details about the survey methodology. For more information on the findings of the study, see *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey: Executive Summary* and *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Provider Survey: Final Report*.

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Contents

Summary	2
Appendix A: EFAS Survey Methodology	4
Appendix B: Estimated Design Effects	18
Appendix C: Derivation of Size Estimates for Selected Federal Food Assistance Programs.....	32
Appendix D: Construction of Analysis Rule.....	35
Appendix E: Sampling and Weighting	58

Summary

Some observers have been puzzled by the seeming redundancy in the presence of both the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS), which functions largely in the U.S. private sector, and major Federal nutrition assistance programs. Findings of the first comprehensive government study of the EFAS suggest that public and private food assistance may work in tandem to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide by itself. Five major types of organizations (emergency kitchens, food pantries, food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations) operate in the EFAS. The study, which was sponsored by USDA's Economic Research Service, provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of the five types of organizations. This report provides details about the survey methodology.

The EFAS helps ensure adequate nutrition for low-income Americans who may not have the resources to purchase sufficient food in stores and who may not be able to acquire sufficient food through government programs. Throughout the country, thousands of emergency kitchens and food pantries provide food assistance to people throughout the year. Regional and national organizations, such as food banks and the food banks' national-level representatives, help the provider agencies obtain food and other resources necessary to accomplish their mission. The EFAS provides meals and food supplies that, for many recipients, complement existing, government food assistance programs.

The study was conducted when the effects of the 1996 national welfare reform were becoming visible throughout the country. It affords an opportunity to examine how the EFAS is operating within the larger context of changes in America's low-income assistance policies and how the EFAS fits within the context of important government nutrition assistance programs. It updates past studies of the EFAS and extends them to provide a broader, more nationally representative view of the system. Additional information will be obtained in a survey of EFAS clients, planned for summer 2001.

Key findings:

- About 5,300 emergency kitchens and 32,700 food pantries participate in the EFAS system. The kitchens provide more than 173 million meals. The pantries distribute an estimated 2.9 billion pounds of food per year, which translates into roughly 6.0 million meals per day, or 2,200 million meals per year.
- Despite the substantial amounts of food distributed by the system, the EFAS remains much smaller in scale than the Federal programs that provide food assistance to the poor.
- The EFAS is mostly locally based and characterized by a wide variety of program structures and innovative practices that meet differing local needs and that use differing local resources and local opportunities.

- Many direct service providers in the EFAS—65 percent of emergency kitchens and 67 percent of food pantries—are faith-based organizations.
- The EFAS extensively uses volunteers.

During the 12 months before our survey, about 25 percent of kitchens and 33 percent of pantries turned away people who requested services, mostly because the individuals in questions were disruptive, had substance abuse problems, or failed meet residency requirements or income guidelines. Most kitchens and pantries did not turn away people because of lack of food.

- About one-fourth of both emergency kitchens and food pantries perceived that there are unmet needs for their services. More than half of food banks and food resource organizations reported facing unmet needs.
- In contrast to geographic distribution of the low-income population, emergency kitchens are disproportionately available in metropolitan (versus nonmetropolitan) settings. For example, only 15 percent of kitchens are located in nonmetropolitan areas, whereas 21 percent of America’s poor population lives in these areas. Furthermore, kitchens in nonmetropolitan areas tend to serve fewer people compared with their metropolitan counterparts.
- The EFAS may not provide consistent coverage across different parts of the day or different days of the week.
- About 89 percent of kitchens and 87 percent of pantries believed they could deal with a 5-percent increase in the need for their services, and about one-third thought that they could deal effectively with as much as a 20-percent increase in need.