

I. STUDY OVERVIEW

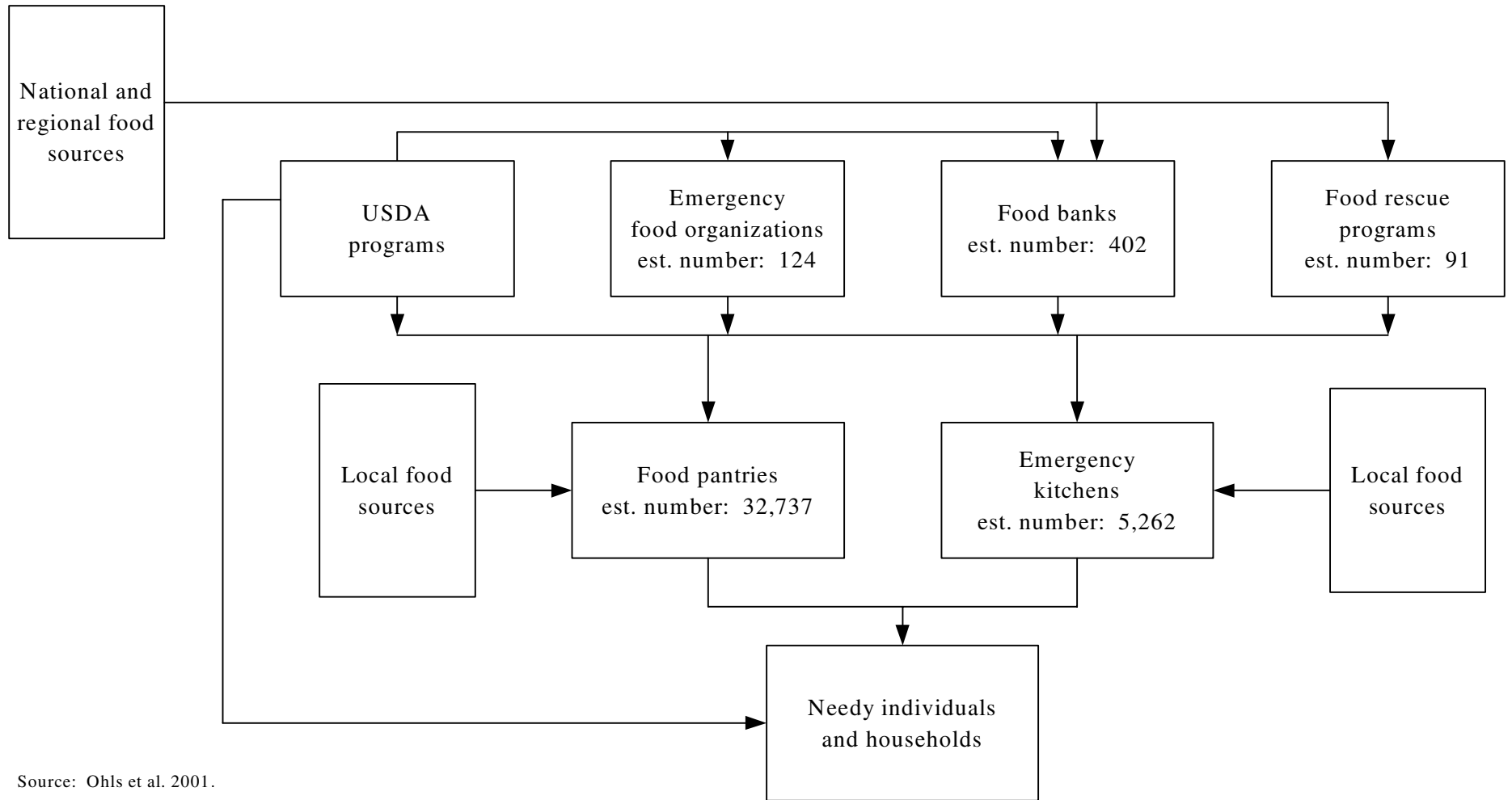
Emergency kitchens and food pantries play an important role in the nutrition “safety net” for America’s low-income and needy populations. These organizations are part of the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS), a network of activities run largely by private organizations, but with some federal government support, to help meet the food needs of the low-income population. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) has the responsibility to provide social and economic information on consumer, food marketing, and rural issues, including food security status of the poor; domestic food assistance programs; low-income assistance programs; and consumer demand for food quality, safety, and nutrition. To better understand how public and private food assistance are utilized by and affect the low-income population, ERS sponsored a national study of the EFAS. The study collected information from emergency food providers during 2000 (the EFAS Provider Survey), and from clients visiting emergency kitchens and food pantries during 2001 (the EFAS Client Survey). This report describes the findings from the client survey and thus complements the findings from the provider survey (Ohls et al. 2001).

A. BACKGROUND ON THE EFAS

Figure I.1 depicts the EFAS and the interrelationships between agencies directly serving people and those serving other providers. Emergency food providers include food banks, food rescue organizations, emergency food organizations (EFOs), kitchens, and food pantries. Food banks obtain food nationally and regionally and distribute it to individual providers. Food rescue organizations perform a similar role but focus on perishable food and food gleaning. EFOs focus their EFAS activities mainly on the distribution of commodities from The Emergency Food

FIGURE I.1

EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE SYSTEM



Source: Ohls et al. 2001.

Note: Emergency shelters are also considered part of the Emergency Food Assistance System but were not included in the present study which focused on programs providing primarily food rather than shelter and food. Food sources include donated food from manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and growers; food purchased at market prices from those same sources; field-gleaning and other donation of unsalable food; leftover food from service organizations, such as restaurants and schools; community donations; State programs; and other sources. For purposes of this study, the term "emergency food organization" was limited to "wholesale" organizations that distributed government commodities primarily to emergency kitchens and pantries. In some States, the term is used more broadly to include organizations that distribute commodities directly to households.

Assistance Program (TEFAP) to other organizations such as emergency kitchens, food banks, and local charities.¹

EFAS providers are primarily private, nonprofit organizations that distribute groceries (unprepared foods) and meals (prepared foods) on a short-term or emergency basis to needy individuals and households who lack the resources to meet their own food needs. EFAS clients include the homeless, the disabled, the elderly, the unemployed, the working poor, and victims of natural disasters.

1. Role of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens

Food pantries and emergency kitchens are important components of the EFAS because they serve as local providers and focus on providing assistance to needy, low-income households and individuals in their neighborhoods. Food pantries are distribution centers that provide groceries and other basic supplies that clients use in their homes or at other locations away from the distribution sites. Emergency kitchens supply meals or food for on-site consumption to people who do not live at the site. Pantries and kitchens can be co-located with other types of EFAS providers such as food banks, food rescue programs, or shelters. Emergency shelters were not included in the client survey, which focused on programs providing primarily food (rather than shelter *and* food or other services) to needy individuals and households.

¹EFOs are designated by states as official distributors for USDA commodities received by the state. Some states define EFOs more broadly to include organizations distributing TEFAP commodities directly to individuals and families. The EFAS client survey defined EFOs as organizations that: (1) distributed government commodities to other EFAS organizations, primarily food pantries and emergency kitchens, rather than directly to individuals and families, (2) were designated by the state TEFAP director as an official distribution organization for TEFAP commodities, and (3) had a primary purpose other than emergency food distribution (Ohls et al. 2001). Organizations that distributed commodities directly to individuals and families were considered food pantries for the EFAS study.

2. Relationship of EFAS to Federal and Private Food Assistance Programs

USDA, through the Food and Nutrition Service, administers several food assistance programs that help low-income households obtain adequate and nutritious diets. The EFAS interacts closely with USDA food assistance programs by providing temporary or supplemental food assistance to many of the same needy populations the USDA programs serve. The largest USDA food assistance program, the Food Stamp Program (FSP), is designed to provide food assistance through normal channels of trade by providing low-income consumers with purchasing power to buy food at market prices from food retailers authorized to participate in the program. Other programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and TEFAP provide food assistance outside regular marketing channels. The NSLP and SBP provide cash subsidies and commodity assistance to schools to help provide low-cost or free lunches and breakfasts to low-income school children. Other federal programs that provide food or food vouchers include the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP), formerly the Nutrition Program for the Elderly.

The EFAS also serves as a distribution outlet for TEFAP, which distributes commodity foods to state and local agencies for distribution to low-income households for home consumption or to charitable organizations that provide meals for needy people (“The Emergency Food Assistance Program,” www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/tefap/tefaphome.htm,” March 28, 2002). States set income requirements for TEFAP clients.

Private, nonprofit organizations provide emergency food assistance as well. Some of these groups are affiliated with national organizations, such as the United Way, Red Cross, or Salvation Army. Some are affiliated with faith-based organizations, such as Catholic Charities,

which might provide or target services to group members or which might be open to the general population. Others are independent.

3. Limitations of Previous Studies

Previous research on EFAS clients has been limited by several factors. First, little existing research is nationally representative. Even the broadest-based, most recent study of the EFAS, conducted for America's Second Harvest, does not cover the entire system, because sites were sampled for the study based on their affiliation with food banks in the Second Harvest network.² The widely cited report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors is based on surveys of city officials conducted in 27 cities (U.S. Conference of Mayors 2001). City officials were asked about changes in demand at emergency food providers and city services (for example, the provision of emergency shelter).

Second, much research has focused on specific groups, such as the homeless population, an important, but relatively small segment of those who need and use the EFAS (10 percent, according to America's Second Harvest (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen 2001). For instance, some EFAS user profiles developed on a national basis in 1988 apply only to the homeless population and do not support an assessment of the overall emergency food network or system (Burt and Cohen 1988; Cohen, Chapman and Burt 1990; Burt et al. 1999).

Third, existing studies vary according to the type of provider covered. Some studies have examined a specific program and its providers, making it difficult to place the results in the broader context of the EFAS as a whole [for example, the TEFAP study done by Quality Planning Corporation and Abel, Daft, and Earley in 1987 and the Prepared Meals Provision

²About 80 percent of all food banks are affiliated with America's Second Harvest (Ohls et al. 2001).

Study (Food and Nutrition Service 1989).]³ Others include both those providers whose primary mission is emergency food assistance and those whose primary mission is something else (such as providing shelter) (Burt et al. 1999).⁴ The studies have produced diverse information from different perspectives about the EFAS, but they have not, in general, yielded detailed information about the clients of food pantries and emergency kitchens that can be generalized to the nation as a whole.

Finally, some of the research is dated, with information collected during the 1980s (Cohen, Chapman, and Burt 1990; Burt and Cohen 1988; Quality Planning Corporation and Abel, Daft and Earley 1987). Constantly changing economic and policy environments highlight the need for up-to-date information on the EFAS, using sound methods and representative samples to assess current policies and to plan future programs.

B. STUDY OBJECTIVES

Information about users of the entire emergency food assistance program addresses the limitations of previous research. The current study reflects conditions after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). PRWORA placed a 3-month time limit to receive food stamps on able-bodied adults without dependents unless they are working or in an approved job training program (or live in areas granted waivers due to insufficient jobs or high unemployment rates), and ended benefits for most legal

³The TEFAP study included interviews with EFO directors and managers of TEFAP distribution sites (Quality Planning Corporation and Abel, Daft, and Earley 1987). The Prepared Meals Provision Study included in-person interviews with homeless users and nonusers of prepared meals (Food and Nutrition Service 1989).

⁴The National Survey of Homeless Assistance and Providers and Clients included telephone and mailed surveys of administrators of homeless assistance programs and in-person interviews with clients of these programs (Burt et al. 1999).

immigrants.⁵ In addition, PRWORA restructured the cash welfare system, which may have reduced participation in food assistance programs. The information from the client survey, combined with that from the provider survey, will inform public policy about the emergency food assistance system and be used to plan programs to address the food needs of the low-income population.

1. The EFAS Provider Survey

The EFAS Provider Survey, conducted for the ERS by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) during 2000, included a national sample of EFAS providers. Data were collected and reported for food pantries, emergency kitchens, food banks, food rescue organizations and emergency food organizations. Key findings for food pantries and emergency kitchens are shown in Table I.1 (Ohls et al. 2001). About 32,700 food pantries, the largest component of the system, provide food for about 6 million meal equivalents per day, or 2.2 billion meal equivalents per year. About 5,300 emergency kitchens provide about 173 million meals per year. About two-thirds of both pantries and kitchens are affiliated with faith-based organizations.

⁵Benefits were later restored for immigrant children and elderly persons.

TABLE I.1

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE EFAS PROVIDER SURVEY

Characteristic	Food Pantries	Emergency Kitchens
Size and service	About 32,700 food pantries participate in the EFAS system, distributing an estimated 2.9 billion pounds of food per year, which translates to roughly 6 million meal equivalents per day, or 2.2 billion meal equivalents per year.	About 5,300 kitchens participate in the EFAS system, providing more than 173 million meals per year.
	About 43 percent of pantries limit households to receiving food once per month or less.	One-third of kitchens (33 percent) serve meals only one day per week.
	About 30 percent of food pantries are located in nonmetropolitan areas.	Emergency kitchens are disproportionately available in metropolitan areas; only 14 percent of kitchens are located in nonmetropolitan areas.
Affiliations	Sixty-seven percent of food pantries are faith-based organizations.	Sixty-five percent of emergency kitchens are faith-based organizations.
Ability to meet perceived needs	About 87 percent of pantries said 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.	About 89 percent of kitchens said 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.
	During the 12 months before the provider survey, about 33 percent of pantries turned away people who requested services, mostly because the individuals in question were disruptive, had substance abuse problems, or failed to meet residency requirements or income guidelines. Most (84 percent) did not turn away people because of lack of food.	During the 12 months before the provider survey, about 25 percent of kitchens turned away people who requested services, mostly because the individuals in question were disruptive, had substance abuse problems, or failed to meet residency requirements or income guidelines. Most (84 percent) did not turn away people because of lack of food.

SOURCE: National Emergency Food Assistance System Study Provider Survey (2000).

The provider survey found that EFAS might not always provide consistent coverage across different parts of the day or different days of the week. In addition, about one-fourth of both food pantries and emergency kitchens perceived that there are unmet needs for their services.

2. Research Objectives for the EFAS Client Survey

The EFAS Client Survey is the only available study that provides data for a nationally representative sample of clients who visit food pantries and emergency kitchens in the EFAS.

The study has five primary objectives:

1. To characterize EFAS clients
2. To determine the frequency and duration of EFAS use and client satisfaction with services
3. To determine the precipitating events that lead clients to seek emergency food assistance
4. To determine EFAS clients' participation in federal food assistance and other benefits programs
5. To assess the food security of EFAS clients

The results from the study will inform policy decisions related to emergency food assistance. The client survey will help USDA understand the characteristics of EFAS clients, including their eligibility for and participation in federal nutrition assistance programs, employment status, household food security, and the ability of the EFAS to meet their needs. Further, the survey will assess the relationship of clients' food security to their utilization of public and private food assistance.

C. ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report contains five chapters. Chapter I provides an overview of the study, including a description of the EFAS and the study's research objectives. Chapter II describes the study

design, data collection methods, and data sources. Chapters III and IV provide the data and major findings for food pantry and emergency kitchen clients, respectively. Chapter V summarizes the key study findings and discusses policy implications. The appendices include specific details related to data collection methods, analytic methods, and the development of sample weights, and supplemental data tables.