

USDA Conducts National Study of Food Pantries

Food pantries have become a very important part of America's nutritional safety net. In recognition of this fact, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) commissioned a national survey of food pantries and soup kitchens. Its report, released in July 2003, confirms what many of our readers already know: millions of Americans are at risk of hunger. According to the USDA report, during a typical month during 2001, 4.3 million households (8.0 million adults and 4.5 million children) acquired food from a pantry. Eighty percent were food insecure. Most startling of all, 42 percent experienced hunger despite the help provided. One-quarter of pantry clients reported that an adult in their household did not eat at least one whole day in the last year because of insufficient food or food dollars.

About one-fifth of pantry clients said there were times they were unable to get emergency food when they needed it. The most prevalent problem was a lack of transportation to the pantry location. Other frequently-cited problems were limited pantry hours, pantries running out of food, and restrictions on the number of times a household could visit. Two-thirds of pantries limit visits to once a month or less.

Nearly half (45 percent) reported visiting a food pantry more than once a month, suggesting that their use of pantry food could no longer be considered an emergency. However, of the nearly 90% of pantry households that were eligible for the Food Stamp Program (FSP), only 55% had received food stamps during the year before the survey. Among eligible households not enrolled in the FSP, the most common reason was "uncertainty about eligibility." The report suggests that "expanding awareness of FSP eligibility may be a key to increasing food stamp participation and decreasing hunger among highly disadvantaged households."

While familiarity with the FSP would be a big plus, the report includes evidence that it would address only a part of the problem. Nearly 75 percent of pantry clients said they preferred receiving food from private pantries than the government. Additionally, 36 percent of households cited food stamp problems as their reason for going to the pantry. Unfortunately, the implication for those households that use two or more kinds of private assistance but no public food assistance is that they are more likely to be homeless and to experience graver "material hardships" than other households.

Ultimately, the report concludes that public food assistance programs need to increase their outreach efforts. And because those in need are turning more to private food pantries for help, these private providers are encouraged to become more involved in referrals to public programs. Currently only one in six private food providers offer "FSP-or WIC-related eligibility counseling." That can and should be increased.

The report also includes data on a topic of frequent public debate: the role of faith-based organizations. Two-thirds of emergency food providers are faith-based, serving 60 percent of the needy. Fourteen percent of pantry clients and 34 percent of kitchen clients are sometimes asked to participate in religious activities. Only about one in ten clients expressed discomfort doing so. The report can be found at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr32/.