

Use of Federal and Community Food Assistance Programs

Households with limited resources employ a variety of methods to help meet their food needs. Some participate in one or more of the Federal food assistance programs or obtain food from emergency food providers in their communities to supplement the food they purchase. Households that turn to Federal and community food assistance programs typically do so because they are having difficulty in meeting their food needs. The use of such programs by low-income households and the relationship between their food security status and use of food assistance programs provide insight into the extent of their difficulties in obtaining enough food and the ways they cope with those difficulties.

This section presents information about the food security status and food expenditures of households that participated in the three largest Federal food assistance programs and the two most common community food assistance programs. (See box, “Federal and Community Food Assistance Programs.”) It also provides information about the extent to which food-insecure households participated in these programs and about the characteristics of households that obtained food from community food pantries. Overall participation in the Federal food assistance programs, participation rates of eligible households in those programs, and characteristics of participants in those programs are not described in this report. Extensive information on those topics is available from the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service.²²

Methods

The December 2004 CPS food security survey included a number of questions about the use of Federal and community-based food assistance programs. All households with incomes below 185 percent of the Federal poverty threshold were asked these questions. In order to minimize the burden on respondents, households with incomes above that range were not asked the questions unless they indicated some level of difficulty in meeting their food needs on preliminary screener questions (listed in footnote 5). The questions analyzed in this section are:

- “During the past 12 months...did anyone in this household get food stamp benefits, that is, either food stamps or a food-stamp benefit card?” Households that responded affirmatively were then asked in which months they received food stamp benefits and on what date they last received them. Information from these 3 questions was combined to identify households that received food stamps in the 30 days prior to the survey.
- “During the past 30 days, did any children in the household...receive free or reduced-cost lunches at school?” (Only households with children between the ages of 5 and 18 were asked this question.)
- “During the past 30 days, did any women or children in this household get food through the WIC program?” (Only households with a child age 0-5 or a woman age 15-45 were asked this question.) WIC is the acronym for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

²²Information on Federal food and nutrition assistance programs, including participation rates and characteristics of participants, is available from the Food and Nutrition Service website at www.fns.usda.gov. Additional research findings on the operation and effectiveness of these programs are available from the ERS website at www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodnutritionassistance.

- “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever get emergency food from a church, a food pantry, or food bank?” The use of these resources any time during the last 12 months is referred to in the rest of this section as “food pantry use.” Households that reported using a food pantry in the last 12 months were asked, “How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?” Households reporting that they did not use a food pantry in the last 12 months were asked, “Is there a church, food pantry, or food bank in your community where you could get emergency food if you needed it?”
- “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever eat any meals at a soup kitchen?” The use of this resource is referred to as “use of an emergency kitchen” in the following discussion.

Prevalence rates of food security, food insecurity, and food insecurity with hunger, as well as median food expenditures relative to the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, were calculated for households reporting use of each food assistance program or facility and for comparison groups of nonparticipating households with incomes and household compositions similar to those of program participants. Statistics for participating households excluded households with incomes above the ranges specified for the comparison groups.²³ The proportions of food-insecure households participating in each of the three largest Federal food assistance programs were calculated, as well as the proportion that participated in any of the three programs. These analyses were restricted to households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line because most households with incomes above this range were not asked whether they participated in these programs.

The numbers and proportions of households using food pantries and emergency kitchens were calculated at the national level, and the proportions of households in selected categories that used food pantries were calculated. Households were assumed not to have used these resources if they had incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line and gave no indication of food insecurity on either of two preliminary screener questions (listed in footnote 5). Analysis (not shown) indicated that this assumption resulted in negligible downward bias on the estimated numbers of households that used these facilities.

Estimates of the proportion of households using emergency kitchens based on the CPS food security surveys almost certainly understate the proportion of the population that actually uses these providers. The CPS selects households to interview from an address-based list and therefore interviews only persons who occupy housing units. People who are homeless at the time of the survey are not included in the sample, and those in tenuous housing arrangements (for instance, temporarily doubled up with another family) also may be missed. These two factors—exclusion of the homeless and underrepresentation of those who are tenuously housed—bias estimates of emergency kitchen use downward, especially among certain subgroups of the population. This is much less true for food pantry users because they

²³Some program participants reported incomes that were higher than the program eligibility criteria. They may have had incomes below the eligibility threshold during part of the year, or subfamilies within the household may have had incomes low enough to have been eligible.

Federal and Community Food Assistance Programs

Federal Food Assistance Programs

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs. The three largest programs are:

- The Food Stamp Program (FSP). The program provides benefits through electronic benefit transfer (EBT) or paper coupons to eligible low-income households. Clients qualify for the program based on available household income, assets, and certain basic expenses. Food stamps can be used to purchase food from eligible retailers. In an average month of fiscal year 2004, the FSP provided benefits to 23.9 million people in the United States, totaling over \$24 billion for the year. The average benefit was about \$86 per person per month.
- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The program operates in about 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential child-care institutions. All meals served under the program receive Federal subsidies, and free or reduced-price lunches are available to low-income students. In 2004, the program provided lunches to an average of nearly 29 million children each school day. About 59 percent of the lunches served in 2004 were free or reduced-price.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The program is a federally funded preventive nutrition program that provides grants to States to support distribution of supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and nonbreastfeeding post-partum women, for infants in low-income families, and for children under 5 in low-income families who are found to be at nutritional risk. Most State WIC programs provide vouchers that participants use to acquire supplemental food packages at authorized food stores. In fiscal year 2004, WIC served an average 7.9 million participants per month with an average monthly benefit of about \$38 per person.

Community Food-Assistance Providers

Food pantries and emergency kitchens are the main direct providers of emergency food assistance. These agencies are locally based and rely heavily on volunteers. The majority of them are affiliated with faith-based organizations. (See Ohls et al., 2002, for more information.) Most of the food distributed by food pantries and emergency kitchens comes from local resources, but USDA supplements these resources through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In 2004, TEFAP supplied 520 million pounds of commodities to community emergency food providers. Over half of all food pantries and emergency kitchens received TEFAP commodities in 2000, and these commodities accounted for about 14 percent of all food distributed by them (Ohls et al., 2002). Pantries and kitchens play different roles, as follows:

- Food pantries distribute unprepared foods for offsite use. An estimated 32,737 pantries operated in 2000 (the last year for which nationally representative statistics are available) and distributed, on average, 239 million pounds of food per month. Households using food pantries received an average of 38.2 pounds of food per visit.
- Emergency kitchens (sometimes referred to as soup kitchens) provide individuals with prepared food to eat at the site. In 2000 an estimated 5,262 emergency kitchens served a total of 474,000 meals on an average day.

need cooking facilities to make use of items from a food pantry.²⁴ Therefore, detailed analyses in this section focus primarily on the use of food pantries.

Finally, proportions were calculated of households participating in the three largest Federal food programs who also obtained food from food pantries and emergency kitchens. This analysis was restricted to households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line.

Data for all calculations were weighted using food security supplement weights. These weights, provided by the Census Bureau, are based on sampling probabilities and enable the interviewed households to statistically represent all civilian households in the United States.

Food Security and Food Spending of Households That Received Food Assistance

The relationship between food assistance program use and food security is complex. There are reasons to expect that households observed to be using food assistance programs in a one-time survey can either be more food secure or less food secure than low-income households not using food assistance. Since these programs provide food and other resources to reduce the risk of hunger, households are expected to be more food secure after receiving program benefits than before doing so. On the other hand, it is the more food-insecure households, having greater difficulty meeting their food needs, that seek assistance from the programs.²⁵ Nearly half of food stamp households and households that received free or reduced-cost school lunches were food insecure as were 42 percent of those that received WIC (table 11). The prevalence rates of food insecurity with hunger among households participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) or receiving free or reduced-cost school lunches were about twice those of nonparticipating households in the same income ranges and with similar household composition. About 70 percent of households that obtained emergency food from community food pantries were food insecure, and nearly one-third were food insecure with hunger. For those who ate meals at emergency kitchens, rates of food insecurity and hunger were even higher.

A possible complicating factor in the preceding analysis is that food insecurity was measured over a 12-month period. An episode of food insecurity or food insecurity with hunger may have occurred at a different time during the year than the use of a specific food assistance program. A similar analysis using a 30-day measure of food insecurity with hunger largely overcomes this potential problem because measured food insecurity with hunger and reported use of food assistance programs are more likely to refer to contemporaneous conditions when both are referenced to the previous 30 days. That analysis (see appendix E and table E-2) found associations between prevalence rates of hunger and the use of food assistance programs that were generally similar to those in table 11.

Households that received food assistance also spent less for food than nonrecipient households (table 12).²⁶ Typical (median) food expenditures of households that received food stamps were 89 percent of the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.²⁷ The corresponding statistics were 85 percent for households

²⁴Previous studies of emergency kitchen users and food pantry users confirm these assumptions. For example, a nationally representative survey of people who use food pantries and emergency kitchens found that about 36 percent of emergency kitchen clients and 8 percent of households that received food from food pantries were homeless in 2001 (Briefel et al., 2003).

²⁵This “self-selection” effect is evident in the association between food security and food program participation that is observed in the food security survey. Participating households were less food secure than similar nonparticipating households. More complex analysis using methods to account for this self-targeting is required to assess the extent to which the programs improve food security (see especially Gundersen and Oliveira, 2001; Gundersen and Gruber, 2001; and Nelson and Lurie, 1998).

²⁶Food purchased with food stamps is included in household food spending as calculated here. However, the value of school lunches and food obtained with WIC vouchers is not included. Food from these sources supplemented the food purchased by many of these households.

²⁷The maximum benefit for food stamp households is approximately equal to the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan. About 24 percent of the FSP caseload receives the maximum benefit. Households with countable income receive less.

with children who received free or reduced-price school lunches, 90 percent for households receiving WIC, and 84 percent for households that received emergency food from food pantries. Typical food expenditures for nonparticipating households in these income ranges were higher than those of participating households, and were near or slightly below the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan.

Table 11

Prevalence rates of food security, food insecurity, and food insecurity with hunger by participation in selected Federal and community food assistance programs, 2004

Category	Food secure	Food insecure		
		All	Without hunger	With hunger
<i>Percent</i>				
Income less than 130 percent of poverty line:				
Received food stamps previous 30 days	50.6	49.4	30.7	18.6
Did not receive food stamps previous 30 days	71.3	28.7	18.6	10.1
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line; school-age children in household:				
Received free or reduced-price school lunch previous 30 days	52.2	47.8	34.8	13.1
Did not receive free or reduced-price school lunch previous 30 days	75.4	24.6	17.9	6.8
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line; children under age 5 in household:				
Received WIC previous 30 days	57.7	42.3	31.8	10.5
Did not receive WIC previous 30 days	67.9	32.1	25.0	7.0
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line:				
Received emergency food from food pantry previous 12 months	31.4	68.6	36.6	31.9
Did not receive emergency food from food pantry previous 12 months	74.8	25.2	17.3	7.9
Ate meal at emergency kitchen previous 12 months	30.4	69.6	20.2	49.4
Did not eat meal at emergency kitchen previous 12 months	70.7	29.3	19.4	9.9

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Table 12

Weekly household food spending relative to the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) by participation in selected Federal and community food assistance programs, 2004

Category	Median weekly food spending relative to cost of the TFP
<i>Ratio</i>	
Income less than 130 percent of poverty line:	
Received food stamps previous 30 days	0.89
Did not receive food stamps previous 30 days	.97
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line; school-age children in household:	
Received free or reduced-price school lunch previous 30 days	.85
Did not receive free or reduced-price school lunch previous 30 days	.98
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line; children under age 5 in household:	
Received WIC previous 30 days	.90
Did not receive WIC previous 30 days	.94
Income less than 185 percent of poverty line:	
Received emergency food from food pantry previous 12 months	.84
Did not receive emergency food from food pantry previous 12 months	1.00

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Participation in Federal Food Assistance Programs by Food-Insecure Households

Somewhat more than half (55.2 percent) of food-insecure households received assistance from at least one of the three largest Federal food assistance programs during the month prior to the December 2004 food security survey (table 13). The largest share of food-insecure households was reached by the National School Lunch Program (36.0 percent), followed by the Food Stamp Program (29.7 percent) and the WIC program (13.6 percent).²⁸ Half of households classified as food insecure with hunger participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs, and the largest share of these (32.6 percent) participated in the Food Stamp Program.

Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens

Some 3.9 million households (3.5 percent of all households) obtained emergency food from food pantries one or more times during the 12-month period ending in December 2004 (table 14). A much smaller number—539,000 households (0.5 percent)—had members who ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen. Households that obtained food from food pantries included 6.9 million adults and 4.2 million children. Of the households that reported having obtained food from a food pantry in the last 12 months, 47 percent reported that this had occurred in only 1 or 2 months; 24 percent reported that it had occurred in almost every month; and the remaining 29 percent reported that it had occurred in “some months, but not every month” (analysis not shown).

²⁸These statistics may be biased downward somewhat. It is known from comparisons between household survey data and administrative records that food program participation is underreported by household survey respondents, including those in the CPS. This is probably true for food-insecure households as well, although the extent of underreporting by these households is not known. Statistics are based on the subsample of households with annual incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line. Not all these households were eligible for certain of the programs. (For example, those without pregnant women or children and with incomes above 130 percent of poverty would not have been eligible for any of the programs.)

Table 13
Participation of food-insecure households in selected Federal food assistance programs, 2004

Program	Share of food insecure households that participated in the program during the previous 30 days ¹	Share of food-insecure-with-hunger households that participated in the program during the previous 30 days ¹
<i>Percent</i>		
Food stamps	29.7	32.6
Free or reduced-price school lunch	36.0	28.0
WIC	13.6	9.6
Any of the three programs	55.2	50.3
None of the three programs	44.8	49.7

¹Analysis is restricted to households with annual incomes less than 185 percent of the poverty line because most households with incomes above that range were not asked whether they participated in food assistance programs.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Use of Food Pantries and Emergency Kitchens by Food Security Status

Use of food pantries and emergency kitchens was strongly associated with food insecurity. Food-insecure households were 17 times more likely than food-secure households to have obtained food from a food pantry, and 16 times more likely than food-secure households to have eaten a meal at an emergency kitchen (table 14). Furthermore, among food-insecure households, those registering hunger were about twice as likely to have used a food pantry and four times as likely to have used an emergency kitchen as those that were food insecure without hunger.

A large majority (80 percent) of food-insecure households, and even of households that were food insecure with hunger (71 percent), did not use a food pantry at any time during the previous year. In some cases, this was because there was no food pantry available or because the household believed there was none available. Among food-insecure households that did not use a food pantry, 26 percent reported that there was no such resource in their community, and an additional 19 percent said they did not know if there was. Nevertheless, even among food-insecure households that knew there was a food pantry in their community, only 31 percent availed themselves of it.

About 30 percent of households that used food pantries and emergency kitchens were classified as food secure. Just over half (55 percent) of these food-secure households did, however, report some concerns or difficulties in obtaining enough food by responding positively to 1 or 2 of the 18 indicators of food insecurity. (A household must report occurrence of at least three of the indicators to be classified as food insecure; see appendix A). The proportions using food pantries and emergency kitchens were much higher among households that reported one or two indicators of food insecurity than among households that reported none—12 times as high for food pantry use and 9 times as high for use of emergency kitchens.

Table 14

Use of food pantries and emergency kitchens, 2004

Category	Pantries			Kitchens		
	Total ¹	Users	Percent	Total ¹	Users	Percent
All households	1,000	3,919	3.5	1,000	539	0.48
All individuals in households	287,751	11,086	3.9	287,911	1,182	.41
Adults in households	215,025	6,869	3.2	215,111	841	.39
Children in households	72,726	4,217	5.8	72,800	341	.47
Food security status:						
Food secure	99,221	1,215	1.2	99,244	164	.17
Food insecure	13,364	2,694	20.2	13,383	375	2.80
Without hunger	8,955	1,399	15.6	8,976	125	1.39
With hunger	4,409	1,295	29.4	4,407	250	5.67

¹Totals exclude households that did not answer the question about food pantries or emergency kitchens. Totals in the bottom section also exclude households that did not answer any of the questions in the food security scale.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Use of Food Pantries by Selected Household Characteristics

The use of food pantries varied considerably by household structure and by race and ethnicity (table 15). Households with children were nearly twice as likely as those without children to use food pantries (5.0 percent compared with 2.6 percent). Food pantry use was especially high among female-headed households with children (10.7 percent), while use by married couples with children (3.0 percent) and households with elderly members (2.5 percent) was lower than the national average. Use of food pantries was higher among Blacks (7.2 percent) and Hispanics (4.9 percent) than among non-Hispanic Whites (2.6 percent), consistent with the higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, and hunger of these minorities. In spite of their lower use rate, non-Hispanic Whites comprised a majority (54 percent) of food-pantry users because of their larger share in the general population.

About 15 percent of households with incomes below the poverty line received food from food pantries, compared with 0.8 percent of households with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty line.²⁹ Among households with incomes above the poverty line but below 185 percent of the poverty line, 1.0 million (2.98 million less 1.96 million) used food pantries in 2004, comprising 26 percent of all households using food pantries and 7.0 percent of households in that income range.

Use of food pantries was higher in principal cities of metropolitan areas (4.2 percent) and in nonmetropolitan areas (4.7 percent) than in metropolitan areas outside of central cities (2.3 percent). There was not a large regional variation in the use of food pantries, although use was somewhat more common in the West (3.9 percent) and the Midwest (3.8 percent).

Combined Use of Federal and Community Food Assistance

Both Federal and community food assistance programs are important resources for low-income households. To design and manage these programs so that they function together effectively as a nutrition safety net, it is important to know how they complement and supplement each other. The extent to which households that participate in Federal food assistance programs also receive assistance from community food assistance programs provides information about these relationships.

About one-fourth (25.9 percent) of the households that received food stamps in the month prior to the survey also obtained food from a food pantry at some time during the year (table 16). These households comprised 43.8 percent of all households that reported using a food pantry. Food pantry use was somewhat less common among households that participated in the National School Lunch Program (18.0 percent) and the WIC Program (17.7 percent), reflecting the higher income-eligibility criteria of these programs. A sizeable majority of food pantry users (65.1 percent) received food from at least one of the three largest Federal food assistance programs. The remainder of food pantry users (34.9 percent) did not participate in any of these Federal programs.

²⁹Use of food pantries by households with incomes higher than 1.85 times the poverty line was probably slightly underreported by the CPS food security survey. Households in this income range were not asked the question about using a food pantry unless they had indicated some level of food stress on at least one of two preliminary screener questions (listed in footnote 5). However, analysis of the use of food pantries by households at different income levels below 1.85 times the poverty line (and thus not affected by the screen) indicates that the screening had only a small effect on the estimate of food pantry use by households with incomes above that range.

Table 15

Use of food pantries by selected household characteristics, 2004

Category	Total ¹	Pantry users	
	1,000	1,000	Percent
All households	112,680	3,919	3.5
Household composition:			
With children < 18	39,850	2,006	5.0
At least one child < 6	17,844	988	5.5
Married-couple families	27,007	822	3.0
Female head, no spouse	9,574	1,024	10.7
Male head, no spouse	2,675	129	4.8
Other household with child ²	594	31	5.2
With no children < 18	72,830	1,913	2.6
More than one adult	43,126	802	1.9
Women living alone	16,955	699	4.1
Men living alone	12,749	411	3.2
With elderly	26,117	657	2.5
Elderly living alone	10,643	324	3.0
Race/ethnicity of households:			
White non-Hispanic	81,269	2,103	2.6
Black non-Hispanic	13,445	969	7.2
Hispanic ³	11,943	584	4.9
Other	6,022	263	4.4
Household income-to-poverty ratio:			
Under 1.00	13,250	1,957	14.8
Under 1.30	18,225	2,416	13.3
Under 1.85	27,919	2,981	10.7
1.85 and over	63,526	519	.8
Income unknown	21,235	419	2.0
Area of residence: ⁴			
Inside metropolitan area	92,223	2,951	3.2
In principal cities ⁵	30,151	1,268	4.2
Not in principal cities	46,374	1,074	2.3
Outside metropolitan area	20,457	968	4.7
Census geographic region:			
Northeast	20,959	604	2.9
Midwest	25,889	996	3.8
South	41,067	1,342	3.3
West	24,764	977	3.9

¹Totals exclude households that did not answer the question about getting food from a food pantry. They represented 0.6 percent of all households.

²Households with children in complex living arrangements—e.g., children of other relatives or unrelated roommate or boarder.

³Hispanics may be of any race.

⁴Metropolitan area residence is based on 2003 Office of Management and Budget delineation. Food Pantry statistics by area of residence are not precisely comparable with those of previous years.

⁵Households within incorporated areas of the largest cities in each metropolitan area.

Residence inside or outside of principal cities is not identified for about 17 percent of households in metropolitan statistical areas.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Only small proportions (from 1 to 3 percent) of households that participated in the three largest Federal food assistance programs reported eating at an emergency kitchen during the 12 months prior to the survey. Nevertheless, these households comprised a sizeable share of emergency kitchen users in the housed population. Among households with incomes less than 185 percent of the poverty line who reported that someone in the household ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen, 40.6 percent received food stamps, 23.5 percent received free or reduced-cost meals in the National School Lunch Program, 7.5 percent received WIC benefits, and 50.6 percent participated in at least one of these three programs. These statistics probably overstate the actual shares of emergency kitchen users who participate in the Federal food assistance programs, however. The households most likely to be underrepresented in the food security survey—those homeless or tenuously housed—are also less likely than other households to participate in the Federal food assistance programs.

Table 16

Combined use of Federal and community food assistance programs by low-income households,¹ 2004

	Share of category that obtained food from food pantry	Share of food pantry users category	Share of category that ate meal at emergency kitchen	Share of emergency kitchen users in category
	<i>Percent</i>			
Received food stamps previous 30 days	25.9	43.8	3.0	40.6
Received free or reduced-price school lunch previous 30 days	18.0	37.7	1.4	23.5
Received WIC previous 30 days	17.7	15.9	1.1	7.5
Participated in one or more of the three Federal programs	19.4	65.1	1.9	50.6
Did not participate in any of the three Federal programs	5.8	34.9	1.0	49.4

¹Analysis is restricted to households with annual incomes less than 185 percent of the poverty line because most households with incomes above that range were not asked whether they participated in food assistance programs.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2004 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.