

# Introduction

The Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) plays a significant role in ensuring adequate food for low-income people in America who may not have the resources to purchase adequate food in stores. Throughout the country, thousands of emergency kitchens and food pantries provide food assistance to low-income people every week. Regional and national organizations, such as food banks and national food bank representatives, help the provider agencies obtain food and other resources necessary to accomplish their mission. The EFAS, which functions largely in the private sector, provides services that complement existing government programs designed to help the poor achieve adequate nutrition levels. (The Food Stamp Program (FSP) is one such government program.)

This report presents the results of the first comprehensive government study of the EFAS. Sponsored by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the study provides detailed information about the system's operations and about each of the major organizations involved in the system. USDA's decision to conduct the study partly reflects the department's specific involvement with certain parts of the EFAS, especially its provision of government commodities through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR), a private research firm headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey, conducted the study under contract with USDA. This introductory chapter describes the objectives of the study, provides background information about the EFAS and its key components, discusses previous research on the EFAS, and describes the methodology of the study.

## Objective of the Study

The overall objective of the study was to determine whether the EFAS has the flexibility to respond to future increases in the need for its services (for example, as a result of a downturn in the economy). This broad objective was embodied in the following specifications for the study:

- To develop an understanding, through a nationally representative sample, of the characteristics, operating structures, and service areas of food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations.
- To understand the resource bases of food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations, as well as the capacity of these providers to manage current and future changes in food demand and food resources.
- To develop a national estimate of the total number of recipients served and the total quantity and type of food, by source, that flows into food banks, food pantries, emergency kitchens, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations.

A key aspect of these supporting goals is that, for the most part, they are *descriptive* in nature. Our main goal was to develop a study that would provide basic information about the system. Detailed *behavioral modeling* of the decision processes of various components of the system was not a major objective. As we will see in the ensuing discussion, our goals have shaped the survey and analysis techniques we used.

## Description of the EFAS

Figure 1.1 provides a simplified overview of the EFAS. The overall goal of the system is to ensure adequate food to people who, because of low income or other factors, might not be able to obtain sufficient food through other means. These people are depicted in the box at the bottom of the figure.

There are two general categories of agencies in the EFAS: those directly serving people and those serving other providers. Local EFAS providers serve households directly; the most important ones are emergency kitchens and food pantries, which serve people in need of food. (We provide more precise definitions and descriptions of these organizations later in the chapter, after this overview.)<sup>1</sup> As shown in the figure, we estimate that there are 5,262 ongoing kitchens and 32,737 food pantries operating in the United States.

Several other types of institutions contribute to the system by providing key support for the direct providers. Food banks are regional organizations that obtain food in bulk and then distribute it to local providers in their areas. There are approximately 402 of them in the United States. Food rescue organizations play a role similar to that of food banks but focus on obtaining perishable foods, such as contributions and gleanings from farmers and surplus food from restaurants and other commercial food service operations. The current study included only the larger food rescue organizations, most of which are affiliated with national organizations. Ninety-one of these organizations were identified. Emergency food organizations—which operate in some, but not all, areas of the country—have a more specialized role, focusing on the distribution of government commodities to local providers. We identified 124 of them for this study.

At the national level, America's Second Harvest, which is a network of about 80 percent of the food banks identified for this study, supports the rest of the system in a number of ways. For example, it (1) obtains food for the system from national organizations, such as major food companies, and (2) provides technical assistance and other services to the

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to the kitchens and pantries, several other types of local providers—including shelters, substance abuse programs, senior centers, and day care centers—also provide emergency food in some situations, but they were not included in this study.

food banks and food rescue organizations. America's Second Harvest also represents the interests of the EFAS community in the national political process, such as by supporting Federal tax legislation to provide tax incentives to stores that contribute food to the EFAS.

The government sector—shown as USDA programs on the diagram in figure 1.1—affects the EFAS in at least two important ways. First, the Federal Government provides food to the system—422 million pounds in 2000—through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In addition, the Federal Government itself operates a number of major nutrition programs aimed at target populations that overlap substantially with the population served by the EFAS. These include the Food Stamp Program (FSP), currently serving about 17 million people per month, and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which provides approximately 15 million free and reduced-price lunches each school day to children from low- and moderate-income households.<sup>2</sup> A 1998 study found that approximately 41 percent of EFAS clients were also receiving food stamps (Second Harvest, 1998, p. 185).

These short descriptions do not fully characterize the organizations providing EFAS services. For purposes of the current study, it has been important to define the various types of EFAS organizations as precisely as possible in order to develop a statistically valid picture of the system as a whole. The following sections describe the components of the EFAS in greater detail and explain how they have been defined in the study.

### Emergency Kitchens

Emergency kitchens—sometimes called “soup kitchens”—are defined for the current study as organizations that provide prepared meals onsite to recipients who do not reside on the agency's premises. Some emergency kitchens provide only food; others provide food in the context of other support services, such as employment assistance, substance abuse counseling, and help in applying for government benefits. The food, which is made available at little or no cost to recipients, is usually, but not always, cooked (some kitchens may serve only sandwiches). The meals generally are available to anyone who needs them, although some kitchens may be limited to specific target popu-

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<sup>2</sup>Statistics are from [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov).

lations, defined in terms of such factors as residence location, the presence (or absence) of children in the household, or income guidelines.

An important issue in defining emergency kitchens is whether to include homeless shelters that serve food. There is a strong case for doing so, as the people who use homeless shelters are likely to overlap substantially with those using other emergency kitchens. However, because shelters had recently been studied in some detail in a different government project (Burt et al., 1999), it was decided at the outset to exclude food service operations at shelters *that serve only residents of the shelters*. The study does include shelters that serve “walk-in” users, but it focuses only on the food service to the nonresident users.

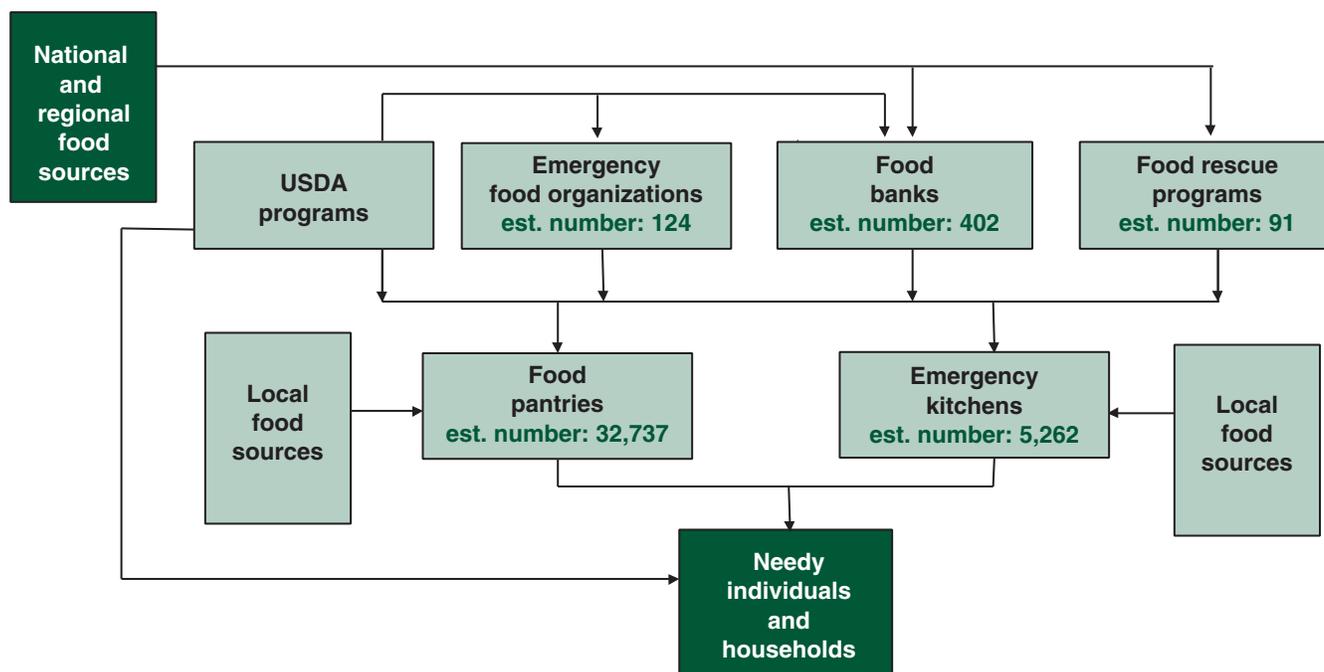
Similar issues arise when considering whether to include other types of institutions that serve food to low-income people but that also offer these people

other services. For example, the Elderly Nutrition Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and operated through local sponsors, provides both congregated (onsite) meal programs at community centers, usually lunches, and home-delivered meals to elderly people. Though donations usually are requested, there is no explicit cost for these meals, and many participants are people with low incomes (Ponza et al., 1996). Similarly, low-income children at day care centers—after-school programs, Head Start programs, and other child care facilities for low-income people—often receive meals at little or no cost.

All these programs are important sources of food for some low-income people who might otherwise rely on more traditional emergency kitchens. For instance, Ponza et al. found that 51 percent of Elderly Nutrition Program recipients of congregated meals had incomes below the poverty level. Similarly, the day care centers

Figure 1.1

### Emergency food assistance provider system



Notes: Emergency shelters are also considered part of the Emergency Food Assistance System but were not included in the present study. Food sources include donated food from manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and growers; food purchased at market prices from those same sources; field-gleaning and other donations 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. This is discussed further in OHS and Saleem-Ismail, 2001.

and homes served by USDA's Child and Adult Care Food programs are targeted principally at children living in families that are below or near the poverty line. Nevertheless, in the interest of maintaining a tight focus on institutions that function *principally* as EFAS providers, we decided to exclude these multiservice programs from the study. To state this more fully, for purposes of the current study, institutions for which the meal service provision was judged to be incidental to some other purpose (for example, recreation or child care) were excluded from the study. Of course, it is important to recognize that, as with other distinctions within the EFAS, this one often blurs in practice. Some degree of judgment was required to make this definition operational. For example, on a very close call, we decided to exclude "Kids Cafes," which provide food, recreational, and study assistance to low-income children.

### **Food Pantries**

Food pantries are defined as organizations that distribute groceries (nonprepared foods) and other basic supplies for offsite use, usually for preparation in a recipient's residence. In general, the foods the pantries provide—such as canned goods, cereals, rice, bread, and sometimes fresh fruits or meat—are intended for further cooking or processing at the recipient's home. As with emergency kitchens, some pantries tend to be freestanding, whereas others are just one component of a larger set of services to low-income people provided by an organization. Many pantries provide food to anyone who says they need it; others operate under income, residential location, or other guidelines that restrict the supply of food to certain groups. Most have limits on how much food can be obtained at a given visit and on how frequently people can receive food assistance. Government commodity programs such as TEFAP, under which many pantries receive food, set rules for how much can be distributed per household and on the income levels of recipients.

### **Food Banks**

Food banks are essentially the "wholesalers" of the system. They obtain food nationally and regionally and distribute it to individual providers. Some repackaging food in smaller units. For many food banks, these functions involve fairly extensive operations, with large warehouses and substantial distribution systems. Many food banks are co-located with food rescue organizations (described below). More formally, food banks are defined as organizations that solicit and distribute

wholesome, edible food (usually surplus) to local non-profit charities or client agencies, which then distribute the food directly to needy individuals and families.

Most, but not all, of the food banks in the country are members of America's Second Harvest, the main national organization of such institutions. Two classes of members operate within the America's Second Harvest framework: (1) direct affiliates, which are full members of the national organization; and (2) Subsidiary Distribution Organizations (SDOs), which largely function as freestanding food banks but are affiliated with Second Harvest through one of the direct affiliates. For purpose of this study, SDOs are treated as separate food banks.

For most food banks, the national America's Second Harvest organization is an important source of much of the food that they distribute. However, food donations obtained regionally are important as well.

Approximately 402 food banks operate in the United States. About 80 percent are Second Harvest affiliates; the others are independents. Some food banks serve EFAS providers throughout an entire State; more commonly, they serve part of a State or a metropolitan area.

### **Food Rescue Organizations**

Food rescue organizations perform a role similar to that of food banks but with a focus on *perishable* food. They seek sources of perishable food and ways to make it available to EFAS kitchens and pantries and to similar agencies. Important sources of food for food rescue organizations include gleanings from farmers' fields; already-harvested foods that farmers contribute; unused, prepared food from restaurants; and surplus foods from major gatherings, such as rock concerts or sports events. After obtaining these foods, the food rescue organizations break them down into units of smaller quantity, as necessary, and make them available to local EFAS providers. Because of the perishable nature of the foods, food rescue organizations generally have smaller warehouses and inventories than do food banks, and they emphasize transferring the food from the sources to the EFAS providers as quickly as possible.

At the beginning of this study, most of the major food rescue organizations in the country were affiliated with a national organization, Foodchain. During the course of the study, Foodchain and Second Harvest merged to become a single organization, now called America's Second Harvest.

## Emergency Food Organizations

Emergency food organizations (EFOs) are defined for this study as organizations that have a primary purpose other than emergency food distribution but that are designated by the States as official distributors for USDA commodities received by the State.<sup>3</sup> For purposes of the current report, we will limit the concept of

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<sup>3</sup>The principal government commodities program is The Emergency Food Assistance Program. It is described more fully in chapter 6.

EFO to organizations that distribute the food to other *organizations*, such as emergency kitchens, food bank, and other local charities. Thus, we exclude from the study's definition EFO organizations that distribute commodities directly to low-income individuals and families. (For our purposes, the latter are considered food pantries.) We note this distinction, which is conceptually useful for sampling and analysis purposes, because, as discussed in chapter 6, some States define the term "EFO" more broadly, to include organizations distributing TEFAP commodities directly to individuals and families.

## Origins of the Current EFAS

An understanding of the origins of EFAS and how it has evolved is important as a backdrop for assessing the findings of the current survey. This section highlights key aspects of the development of the system.

The origins of EFAS in the United States go back at least to the Great Depression in the 1930s. At that time, with poverty and deprivation existing throughout the country, the Federal Government provided commodities for widescale distribution. Breadlines and soup kitchens were also organized to feed destitute people with no other resources for obtaining food (Poppendieck, 1986; Eisinger, 1998).

Once World War II began and the U.S. economy finally emerged from the Depression, these highly visible breadlines and soup kitchens largely disappeared. However, during a period extending from the end of World War II to the late 1970s, the Federal Government continued to use commodity distribution programs periodically, both for assisting the poor and as a way of reducing agricultural surpluses (Berry, 1984). With the advent of the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960s, the Federal Government began to develop what has now evolved into the Food Stamp Program, again motivated both by wanting to provide assistance to the poor and by concern for the farm economy (Ohls and Beebout, 1993).

These antecedents notwithstanding, the beginning of the current EFAS is usually traced to the early 1980s (Eisinger, 1998; Poppendieck, 1998). At that time several forces came together to create the current EFAS.

First, a deep recession substantially increased the need for food assistance. Second, partly in response to the first factor, in 1981 Congress enacted a commodity distribution program that evolved into the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) 2 years later. While the TEFAP initially focused on direct distribution of a limited number of government commodities, eventually it evolved into a broader program that provides a Federal subsidy for food distribution to needy individuals through the EFAS. (The TEFAP is discussed more fully in the next section in our discussion of relevant government policies.) This program was a significant factor in highlighting the need for additional food-related assistance to low-income people and for increasing the resources available for providing this assistance.

A third development, at approximately the same time, was the emergence of Second Harvest as a national organization representing the EFAS community. Originally started in the 1960s as a food bank in the Southwest, by the late 1970s Second Harvest had assumed a national role, directly obtaining food from producers for distribution to EFAS providers. Reflecting this role, in 1984, the organization moved to Chicago to be better positioned for its work (Daponte and Bade, 2000). Since then, Second Harvest has been active in obtaining donations of food from major food companies and has also assumed a leadership position in representing the EFAS community in the Federal political process. During the 1980s the work of Second Harvest—together with that of several other private national organizations concerned with hunger, including the Food Research and Action Center, Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army, and Bread for the World—significantly contributed to publicizing the need for food assistance. A result was an increase in the supply of food available for the EFAS, as well as in other forms of support such as cash contributions and volunteer service (Eisinger, 1998).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s a broad array of private pantries and kitchens emerged at the local level. While no reliable data are available on the growth in the number of food pantries and emergency kitchens during this time, it is safe to say that by the end of the 1980s the private EFAS had emerged in the basic form in which it exists today.

The future directions of the system, however, were still far from clear. As the system took shape in the early 1980s, it was widely assumed that it would be a temporary, stopgap measure that would substantially shrink, if not disappear entirely, when the Nation's economy recovered from the recession (Eisinger, 1998). Yet today the system is firmly institutionalized as a mainstay of the country's antihunger activities.

While the national forces described above have shaped the EFAS as it has emerged, it is important to recognize that its evolution has been largely a local process. The direct providers of food assistance in the system—that is, food pantries and emergency kitchens—have over time emerged in response to local needs. By and large, there has been no national coordination of the location of pantries and kitchens or of their number. Indeed, one of the important research issues in the current study is the degree to which the resulting coverage of various areas is adequate.

## Federal Assistance to the EFAS

The main Federal program that provides assistance to the EFAS is the successor to the original TEFAP, which has retained the acronym but is now called The Emergency Food Assistance Program.<sup>4</sup> Begun in the early 1980s, the TEFAP (then under a different name) was originally limited to the direct distribution of surplus cheese, with the dual objectives of alleviating hunger and reducing the amount of excess government commodities (our discussion of TEFAP draws substantially on Eisinger, 1998.) However, although the program had been intended as a very-short-term expedient, it proved extremely popular politically and has been renewed in successive legislation. Since its inception, it has evolved considerably. Relatively soon after the program was

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<sup>4</sup>EFAS providers, particularly food pantries, also sometimes distribute food under a second Federal program, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). The CSFP channels nutritious commodities directly to certain target groups believed by Congress to be at particular risk of needing additional food, including: pregnant and breastfeeding women, other new mothers up to 1-year postpartum, infants, children up to age 6, and elderly people at least 60 years of age. However, while EFAS providers sometimes serve as CSFP distribution points, it appears that most CSFP food is distributed outside of the EFAS, and we have therefore not focused on the CSFP in the current study.

set up, the selection of commodities made available for distribution was greatly increased. Then, later in the 1980s as Federal commodity surpluses were reduced, Congress authorized USDA to purchase commodities on the open market for use in the program. Over time, these purchased commodities have become a major source of food available under the program.

The methods of distribution used in TEFAP have also evolved over time. Initially the food was directly distributed to needy households, often through State or local governmental agencies. More recently, the distribution of commodities has become more integrated into the EFAS. TEFAP food initially goes to the States, which have considerable flexibility in how they distribute it. In some instances, direct mass distributions are still used, either by the States themselves or by organizations they contract with that have no other connection to the EFAS. However, as will be seen in our survey findings below, the States more commonly work through the EFAS, distributing the commodities to food banks, which then channel them to food pantries and, in some instances, emergency kitchens.

By law, State agencies must establish income eligibility standards to ensure that TEFAP foods provided for household distribution go only to low-income households. However, no such standards are required for TEFAP foods used in meal preparations at emergency kitchens.

## Recent Research on the EFAS

Recent studies of the EFAS have tended to focus on three important areas:

- The operations of the EFAS itself, including the nature of providers, their resources, operating characteristics, and policies;
- The need for the EFAS, in terms of the number of people experiencing hunger or at risk of hunger who could be helped by EFAS services; and
- The size of the EFAS, in terms of the number of providers, the number of people that they serve, and the amount of food distributed.

We discuss each of these areas below.

### Operations of the EFAS

Much of the previous research on the EFAS has focused on describing its operations. In 1993 and again in 1997, Second Harvest conducted surveys of its members designed, in part, to obtain descriptive information about the institutions involved and their interactions in providing emergency food. The 1997 study, in particular, provides the most extensive analysis of the nature of pantries, kitchens, shelters, and food banks prior to the present study. The 1997 Second Harvest study also involved an extensive client survey that yielded important insight into the needs and characteristics of clients in the EFAS. (Second Harvest is currently conducting the third in this series of studies.)

Among the key findings of the 1997 Second Harvest study were that (1) EFAS provider agencies were heavily reliant on volunteer labor to accomplish their work; (2) the majority of provider organizations were relatively small, with annual budgets below \$10,000; (3) more than half of the pantries and kitchens were faith-based, with most of the rest being secular private, nonprofit institutions; and (4) many agencies reported that they needed more food than was available.

Significant insight into the operations of the EFAS has recently become available through the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (Burt et al., 1999). While this study focused principally on homeless people and the organizations that serve them, the high overlap between those providers and the

EFAS make it a valuable source of information about emergency food providers. The study found that pantries were the most common providers of food-related services to the homeless,<sup>5</sup> followed by shelters and emergency kitchens.

Approximately 55 percent of the food programs surveyed were run by religious organizations and only about 5 percent by government agencies. A majority of the food program sponsors reported that they used no government funding at all, while most of the others reported only limited use of such funding. Burt et al. also found substantial variation across data collection areas in the ratio of client visits per day per 10,000 people below the poverty line. This suggests the possibility of considerable unevenness in service availability or need.

Taking a somewhat different research approach, Daponte and Bade (2000), in addition to examining the history of the EFAS, assessed its current workings by providing detailed case studies of the operations of two food banks, one in Connecticut and one in Pennsylvania. While the case study approach limits the general application of their findings, as compared with those of Second Harvest and Burt et al., it permits a more in-depth examination of the forces that shape food bank operations. In particular, Daponte and Bade provide rich details about the operations of the two food banks, including such basic characteristics as (1) organizational structure; (2) sources of food; (3) sources of other support; and (4) relationships between the food banks and other organizations in their communities. A common theme in the descriptions is the need for these organizations to develop innovative partnerships with other private and public sector institutions to maximize the effectiveness of their missions.

### Need for the EFAS

Another body of recent literature that provides an important context for the current study is the emerging research on food insecurity. Based on earlier work (Radimer et al., 1992; Wehler et al., 1991; and Bickel et al., 2000), the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey began, in 1995, to collect household data once

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<sup>5</sup>Some food distributed by pantries, such as bread and certain canned goods, can be used without additional preparation and thus can be useful for the homeless.

a year on issues related to food insecurity and hunger. Eighteen of the questions in this module have been used by a USDA-sponsored research team to develop a formal index of food security (Hamilton et al., 1997), and this work has recently been extended to cover subsequent data (Andrews et al., 2000).

Based on the most recent data, the results of the USDA research suggest that 8.7 percent of households in the United States undergo “food insecurity,” defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” (The estimate is from Andrews et al. (2000); the definition is quoted in Bickel et al. (2000).) Further, about 2.8 percent of households are also estimated to have periods of hunger, defined as the “uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food...recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food” (Bickel et al., 2000).

These statistics help define the target population that the EFAS serves. More detailed research by the sources cited above has found that food insecurity and hunger tend to be particularly common in certain social and demographic groups, including:

- Households with children
- Female-headed households
- Non-Hispanic Blacks
- Hispanics
- Households below or near the poverty level

### **Size of the EFAS**

Because the EFAS is highly decentralized, with most of the service providers being independent local organizations, only limited information is available about the overall size of the system. Issues related to size, however, are crucial in examining how successful the system is in meeting the overall need for its services.

In recent years, the most commonly cited estimates of the size of the EFAS have been those of the 1997 Second Harvest study mentioned above. In assessing those figures, it is important to note that the Second Harvest study was limited to EFAS organizations receiving food from Second Harvest food banks. However, it is generally believed (and this is supported by evidence in later chapters of the current report) that

the Second Harvest network includes most, though not all, EFAS service providers.

Based on information from its 1997 survey of EFAS agencies, Second Harvest (1998) estimated that there were approximately 34,000 pantries in its network, serving more than 17.5 million people per year. The comparable estimates for emergency kitchens were approximately 7,700 kitchens serving 2.3 million people per year; the numbers for shelters were 5,800 providers and 1.6 million people. (To the extent possible, these estimates were intended to be “unduplicated,” in the sense that any person is counted only once for each provider type, even if that person uses it multiple times.)

Recently, an alternative set of relevant—though not directly comparable—numbers has become available from Burt et al. (1999). These numbers are based on a national survey of service providers identified as serving the homeless directly; thus the domain of this study may be somewhat more restricted than that of Second Harvest, particularly for food pantries, many of which may not routinely serve homeless people. Burt et al. estimate that there are approximately 4,000 emergency kitchens serving the homeless, a number considerably smaller than, but within the general range of, the Second Harvest estimate.<sup>6</sup> Their estimate of the number of food pantries (about 9,000) is much lower than that of Second Harvest, but the difference is probably accounted for, in large part, by the focus of Burt et al. on homeless providers. In particular, it is likely that Burt and her colleagues may have identified a substantial proportion of larger pantries, which tend to serve a broad clientele, but may not have included many smaller pantries that serve more limited populations such as an immediate neighborhood or people known to a particular religious organization.

Burt et al. also made estimates of the number of “program contacts,” or people served, on a typical day by the kitchens and pantries they interviewed. These numbers were approximately 0.57 million people for kitchens and 1.03 million households for pantries.

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<sup>6</sup>The 4,000 figure cited in the text includes the Burt et al. (1999) estimates for both kitchens with fixed locations and mobile emergency food providers.

## **Summary**

In U.S. Government estimates for 1999, nearly 27 million people in U.S. households undergo periods of food insecurity and more than 7 million of them may be hungry (Andrews et al., 2000). The EFAS is intended to provide food to people in this group who need assistance.

The available information about EFAS providers suggests that they consist of a large number of mostly

private local organizations. These organizations supply the poor with both groceries (in the case of pantries) and prepared meals (emergency kitchens and shelters). Many of the EFAS providers are faith-based institutions, and many rely heavily on volunteer staff to perform their work.

The current study builds upon earlier work to provide a detailed statistical picture of the institutions in the EFAS.

## Economic and Policy Context

The survey results presented in this report should be considered in light of the broad economic and policy contexts in which the EFAS operated during the period that the survey was undertaken—March through October 2000. Key economic and policy factors likely to have affected the EFAS during this time are discussed below.

### Impact of the Economy

At the time the survey was fielded, the U.S. economy had been in a period of prolonged economic growth and prosperity for most of the past decade. During that period, per capita income had risen steadily and the national unemployment rate had dropped to 4 percent, its lowest level in more than 20 years.

This prosperity had a potential impact on EFAS providers in at least two important ways. First, it meant that the level of need for EFAS services was probably lower than it would have been in a time of unfavorable economic conditions. Second, the expanding economy may have affected the resources available to the EFAS. As will be seen in later chapters, the EFAS is highly dependent on financial donations from local individuals and organizations; it also depends heavily on contributions of food from local as well as national sources. It seems likely that the economic prosperity the country was experiencing served to increase the ability and willingness of potential donors to support the system. However, an alternative argument is that the high levels of prosperity could have discouraged donations by making the need for them less evident to donors.

### Policy Context

At the time the current survey was undertaken, the most important policy affecting the EFAS was one set in motion 4 years earlier by a major piece of welfare reform legislation passed by Congress in 1996. This legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), assigned greater control of the welfare system to the States and created incentives for them to find ways to reduce welfare roles. Concurrently, it replaced the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

These welfare program changes, together with the continued economic prosperity and possibly other factors, had a substantial effect on the number of people receiving assistance in the United States. The average number of people on welfare dropped from about 11 million to 6 million between 1997 and 2000.

A related development during the same period was a large reduction in the number of households receiving food stamps. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of people in households receiving food stamps declined substantially, from 23 million to 17 million. There are multiple explanations for this. One important factor almost certainly was the strong overall economy and declining poverty rate. Also, PRWORA contained several provisions that tightened food stamp eligibility, particularly for able-bodied adults without dependents and for most legal aliens. However, it has also been suggested that the decline in food stamp users may have been associated directly with the changes in cash assistance programs. It is possible, for instance, that changes in local welfare office procedures could have discouraged food stamp participation or that the changes associated with welfare reform may have created a climate in which use of food stamps was viewed as less acceptable to potential clients. (These and other possible explanations for the decline in food stamp participation are discussed in Wilde et al. (2000).)

There are a number of possible effects of these changes in welfare and food stamps on EFAS providers. On the one hand, to the extent that the welfare system changes (or the growing economy) helped more households become self-sufficient, the changes may have decreased the need for EFAS services by helping low-income families become better off financially. On the other hand, to the extent that the welfare changes have placed increased pressure on households to forgo assistance before they were fully self-sufficient, it is possible that the need for EFAS services has increased. Indeed, at the time PRWORA was passed, there was concern within the advocacy community that the result would be increased requests for EFAS services. This issue is addressed more fully in a subsequent chapter, where we present survey data on the EFAS providers' perceptions of how the need for their services has changed.

## Overview of Methods Used in Current Study

To provide a basis for interpreting the findings to be presented, this section gives a short overview of the methods used in the study. A more complete description of the survey methods is presented in appendix A, while appendix E describes the statistical sampling methods. (For appendixes A through E, see *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings from the Provider Survey, Volume III: Survey Methodology* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008>.)

### Sampling and Data Collection

The results presented in this report are based on telephone surveys of five types of EFAS organizations:

- Emergency kitchens
- Food pantries
- Food banks
- Food rescue organizations
- Emergency food organizations

Nationally representative samples of 1,517 kitchens and 1,617 pantries were interviewed. These samples were drawn from 360 primary sampling units (PSUs), consisting of individual counties or contiguous county groupings,<sup>7</sup> drawn with probabilities proportional to their size.

Since no full lists of kitchens or pantries were available for sampling purposes, the sample frames for these surveys were compiled through (1) contacts with the food banks that served the areas sampled, and (2) extensive contacts with local informants in those areas, including staff of public and private social service agencies, churches, libraries, and similar organizations.

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<sup>7</sup>Some large counties received multiple “hits” in the sampling process so the number of separate, discrete PSUs drawn is 294.

For the other three types of organizations—food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations—interviews were attempted with all the organizations that could be identified. The lists of these organizations were compiled through contacts with (1) national representatives of the organizations, (2) other national organizations and advocacy groups concerned about hunger, (3) State TEFAP directors, and (4) contacts with local EFAS providers.

The study used computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) methods from MPR’s telephone interviewing facilities in New Jersey and Maryland. The fielding period lasted from March through October 2000. Response rates for the kitchen and pantry surveys were 94 and 95 percent, respectively. Those for the other types of providers ranged from 94 to 98 percent.

### Analysis

Reflecting the descriptive nature of the study, the analysis in this report consists largely of tabulations and cross tabulations of the survey data. In some situations, we have also drawn on information from the U.S. Census, USDA, and other sources to help place the survey data in context.

All tabulations of the kitchen and pantry survey data were performed using weights that correct for variation across PSUs in probabilities of selection, as well as adjusting for differences in nonresponse. The derivation of the weights is described in appendix E of the Survey Methodology (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008>.)

Because the survey was clustered into a limited number of PSUs, the unadjusted measures of precision produced by standard statistical software programs do not reflect true precision levels. Therefore, we have estimated “design effect” adjustment factors for selected variables. The estimation of these design effects and the design effects themselves are described in appendix B.