

Key Issues Related to the Emergency Food Assistance System

To conclude the report, this chapter draws on data presented up to this point to examine a number of important *cross-cutting* themes concerning the EFAS as a whole. These themes include:

- The variety of approaches the EFAS uses to provide emergency food assistance.
- The overall size of the EFAS relative to government programs that provide food assistance to low-income households.
- The evidence available on how the size of the system has changed during the past several years.
- Possible differences in the availability of EFAS services across different times of the day and week and between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan locations.
- Whether the EFAS is able to serve all the households that seek its services.
- Whether the EFAS would have the capacity to expand its services, should the need arise.

Variety Within the EFAS

A salient feature of the EFAS that soon becomes apparent to anyone studying the system is the high degree of innovation and diversity with which EFAS providers have adapted to local conditions and needs. The providers have developed many kinds of partnerships with each other and with other members of their local communities. Because program operations are planned and carried out almost entirely at the local level, there is great variation in such factors as staffing patterns, facilities, and sources of supplies.

It is difficult to convey this creative variety in a largely statistical study like the current one, but there is evidence of it in much of the material covered in the previous chapters. For example, our examination of funding sources for emergency kitchens, pantries, and food banks found that these organizations draw on a large set of sources, with no single one accounting for a predominant share of support. Similarly, local operators cobble together the food supplies they need from many

different sources, including national organizations like America's Second Harvest, local food drives, contributions from local retailers, government programs such as TEFAP and the CSFP, and food rescue operations that salvage food that might otherwise go to waste. They also purchase some of their food at market prices, as necessary.

On a more anecdotal plane, some of the innovative practices we have encountered while performing this study are as follows:

- Providers in a local area set the schedules of their kitchens' operations cooperatively, to guarantee that some coverage will be consistently available to people who need it.
- A food bank establishes an arrangement with a nearby prison to obtain food grown on the prison farm, which it distributes to its client agencies.
- Food rescue organizations make arrangements with rock music concert promoters to obtain leftover food from rock concerts.
- Municipal officials locate a small food pantry near the back door of a newly constructed suburban municipal building so that food pantry users can leave with their food as inconspicuously as possible, avoiding embarrassment.
- A food rescue organization arranges with airlines at a local airport to obtain prepared meals that are not used on their flights.
- A kitchen in a rural community establishes a procedure whereby meat obtained by hunters can be processed and made available to the kitchen.
- A private food pantry locates itself at a food stamp office so that it can supply emergency food supplies to food stamp applicants to use until their applications are processed.

These kinds of ad hoc arrangements—often made at the local level in response to specific needs and opportunities—help the EFAS supply services to the poor within the constraints of available resources.

Overall Size of the EFAS

For an overall picture of how the EFAS fits into America's pattern of nutrition assistance for the poor, it is useful to develop size estimates of the main components of both the EFAS and the public food-assistance programs. We provide these estimates in this section.

Various private and public programs provide food assistance in different forms. Emergency kitchens provide meals directly, whereas pantries generally provide unprepared food, which can be measured most directly in pounds. The Food Stamp Program provides food coupons (or comparable computer accounts), which are denominated in dollar amounts; the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program of the USDA provide meals, as does the Child and Adult Care Food Program. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children typically distributes vouchers for specific foods that are denominated in amounts of food, but that are often converted to dollars of food for statistical reporting purposes.

To place the different programs on a comparable basis, we have used a series of approximations to estimate "meal equivalents" for the food distributed by each program. These meal equivalents are defined as the approximate number of meals that could be derived from the various forms of assistance. (Details of the assumptions made in deriving the figures are given in appendix C of *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings from the Provider Survey, Volume III: Survey Methodology* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008>.)

Our analysis focuses on comparisons between the EFAS and the five largest government means-tested programs that provide nutrition assistance to low-income households: the Food Stamp Program, National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and Child and Adult Day Care Program (CACFP). To some degree, this understates the size of the assistance provided by Federal programs. However, the Federal programs included in the comparison together account for more than 95 percent of USDA's budget for assistance to low-income households; thus, the comparisons provide a reasonably accurate indication of the relative sizes of the EFAS and government programs with similar objectives.

It is important to note that our comparisons used 2000 data, which cover a period when participation in the FSP was at its lowest level in 10 years. Similar comparisons done at the peak of FSP participation in 1994 probably would show a larger relative size for the public sector.

Derivation of Comparable Size Estimates

Table 8.1 shows the approximate relative size of the EFAS and of selected USDA nutrition assistance programs in the United States. Our methods for estimating the table entries are described below.

EFAS Food Distribution

We derived the estimate of meal equivalents for EFAS pantries from our estimate in chapter 3 that these providers distribute approximately 239 million pounds of food per month. Data from the 1987-88 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey suggest that the average meal for a low-income person in the United States uses about 1.30 pounds of ingredients (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1994).⁶⁶ Given this figure, we estimate that pantries distribute approximately 184 million meal equivalents per month.

Emergency kitchens produce meals directly. Therefore, we have drawn the size estimate for kitchens shown in table 8.1 directly from the calculations of meals served, presented in chapter 2. This estimate is approximately 474,000 meals per day, or 14 million meals per month.

The Public Sector: USDA's Food Stamp Program, the Nation's largest public sector nutrition assistance program, serves approximately 17 million people per month. On average, given the program's benefit computation rules and levels of participants' income, program benefits are expected to provide approximately 65 percent of each participant's food costs per month.⁶⁷ Therefore, assuming 90 meals per month as an approximation, food stamp benefits are expected to cover about 58 of a participant's 90 meals. These num-

⁶⁶The 1.30 figure is very similar to the factor of 1.28 used in Second Harvest (1998). The derivation of the estimate from tables in the USDA report is detailed in appendix C. The estimate is based on table 4 of that report, with the category "beverages" excluded.

⁶⁷We derived the estimate that FSP benefits cover 65 percent of food from USDA data. These data show that, on average, households' food stamp benefits are approximately 65 percent of their Thrifty Food Plan (Castner and Rosso 2000, table A13). The Thrifty Food Plan is the cost that the food stamp regulations assume is necessary to provide a household with one month of low-cost but nutritious meals.

bers imply that food stamp assistance provides approximately 980 million meals per month.⁶⁸

The National School Lunch Program also provides extensive food assistance. During a typical month when schools are in session, approximately 289 million free or reduced-price lunches are served under this program (most meals are in the “free” category).⁶⁹ The comparable figures for the School Breakfast Program and the CACFP are 121 million and 116 million meals, respectively.

The WIC program provides food assistance to women, infants, and children. As derived in appendix C of *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings from the Provider Survey: Survey Methodology* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008>, the average monthly WIC benefit package, averaged over different categories of WIC recipients, provides approximately 61 pounds of food.⁷⁰ Using the factor of approximately 1.30 pounds of ingredients per meal that was used in the preceding section, we estimate WIC meal equivalents of approximately 46.9 meals per participant per month. The WIC program has approximately 7.3 million participants each month, so this estimate implies that the program produces roughly 343 million meal equivalents per month.⁷¹

Overall Size

These calculations yield an estimate that the EFAS and the government programs included in table 8.1 together provide 2.1 billion meal equivalents per month and 24.8 billion per year. To place this figure in perspective, about 57.4 million people in this country live below 150 percent of poverty. If each of these people consumes three meals per day during a 30-day month,

⁶⁸Sixty-five percent of meals being covered times 90 meals per month equals 0.65×90 , or 58 meals per month. Multiplying 58 meals per month times 17.2 million participants yields 998 million meals per month.

⁶⁹The figure is from administrative data on the USDA Website, www.usda.gov. Free and reduced-price meals are ones that are substantially subsidized by the program. Their receipt is limited to children whose families are below 185 percent of the poverty line. Children from higher-income families also receive meals under the program, but these meals have much lower subsidies and are not included in the data in the table and text.

⁷⁰Benefits vary, depending on whether a woman is pregnant or whether she is nursing, the age of a child, and special needs.

⁷¹Sixty-one pounds of food per month, divided by 1.3 pounds per meal, yields 46.9 meals per recipient. That, multiplied by 7.3 million participants, equals 343 million meals per month.

they would consume a total of approximately 5.2 billion meals. Thus, approximately 37 percent of the meals eaten by people living below 150 percent of poverty may be provided by the Federal Government or the EFAS. (Of course, some of the food assistance considered here may be provided to people who are above 150 percent of the poverty line.)

Relative Sizes of the EFAS and Public Sector Programs

As shown in table 8.1, the EFAS provides low-income Americans with approximately 198 million meals per month. The meals that pantries provide constitute by far the largest component of that total, an estimated 93 percent. However, it is likely that emergency kitchens serve specific sectors of the low-income population—many of which pantries probably could not serve effectively—such as the homeless and other people who have difficulty preparing their own meals.

The numbers displayed in table 8.1 also provide an important perspective on the size of the EFAS relative to that of the public sector programs. In particular, it is clear that even though the EFAS provides food assistance to several million Americans each day, the Federal Government remains the primary source of food assistance for low-income people in the United States. Federal programs, the most important of which is the Food Stamp Program, provide about 1,867 million meals or meal equivalents to low-income households each month, approximately 9 times the number provided by the EFAS.

The importance of the public sector in the overall picture of food assistance is further highlighted by the fact that, as noted in previous chapters, the EFAS itself receives significant amounts of food from the Government through the TEFAP program. In particular, as discussed in chapter 6, in 2000 government commodities accounted for about 14 percent of the total food distributed by emergency kitchens and food pantries. Indeed, what appears to have evolved is a system in which the Government provides the bulk of the resources needed for food assistance, while the EFAS supplements government aid for some clients and serves additional low-income people who, for various reasons, are not in the Federal programs.⁷² After

⁷²Second Harvest (1998) estimates that approximately 40 percent of EFAS recipients also participated in the FSP (p. 185). The client survey will examine this issue with an updated database that has greater national representation.

data from the planned client survey component of this project become available, it will be possible to examine in detail the degree of overlap between those served by the EFAS and those served by government programs.

A closely related issue is the exact role played by the EFAS, given the availability of the government

programs. Does it exist because the government programs do not provide enough assistance to meet the needs of some low-income households? Do some types of households need assistance but lack effective access to government programs? If so, what would promote better access? These important issues are discussed in a later section and will be addressed in the forthcoming client survey component of the research.

Table 8.1—Relative sizes of the EFAS and selected public sector programs, in “meal equivalents” per month

Program	Meal equivalents distributed per month	Annualized meal equivalents
	<i>Million</i>	<i>Billion</i>
EFAS¹		
Pantries ²	184	2.2
Emergency kitchens ³	14	0.2
Total EFAS	198	2.4
Public sector		
Food Stamp Program ⁴	998	12.0
National School Lunch Program ^{5,6}	289	3.5
School Breakfast Program ^{5,7}	121	1.5
Child and Adult Care Food Program ⁸	116	1.4
WIC ⁹	343	4.1
Total public sector	1,867	22.4
Total	2,065	24.8

¹Includes some public sector support through USDA commodities.

²239 million pounds of food per month ÷ 1.3 pounds per meal.

³474,000 million meals per day × 30 days per month.

⁴Participants from the FNS Website × 30 days per month × 3 meals per day × percentage of Thrifty Food Plan included in the average benefit level.

⁵Assumes a month during which schools are operating.

⁶Annual meals from the FNS Website ÷ 9 months × 0.571. (The 0.571 factor is the proportion of meals that are free or reduced price.)

⁷Annual meals from the FNS Website ÷ 12 months × 0.837. (The 0.837 factor is the proportion that are free or reduced price.)

⁸Annual meals from the FNS Website ÷ 12 months × 0.837. (The 0.837 factor is the proportion that are free or reduced price.)

⁹Monthly participants from the FNS website × 61 pounds per monthly benefit issuance ÷ 1.3 pounds per meal. The 61 pounds factor is based on different types of WIC packages received by different categories of recipients and is derived in appendix C of *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings from the Provider Survey: Survey Methodology* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan01008>.

EFAS = Emergency Food Assistance System.

USDA = U.S. Department of Agriculture.

WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey (2000) data, weighted tabulations, and USDA statistics, as derived in appendix C. Data for the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program are taken from the FNS Website [www.fns.usda.gov/pd]. Only free or reduced-price meals are included.

Changes During the Past 3 Years in Emergency Food Needs

Considerable attention has been focused in recent years on whether the need for emergency food assistance has changed, and if so, how. This issue has direct significance for assessing the capacity of the EFAS to serve clients who rely on it. In addition, some observers view changes in the EFAS as a barometer of the impacts of the major welfare reform legislation enacted in 1996. To the extent that welfare reform measures have achieved their objective of helping households reach self-sufficiency, they presumably have reduced the need for EFAS services. If, however, the reforms have had the effect of moving people off welfare without giving them the means (through counseling and training, for instance) to provide for themselves, then they may have an increased need for the EFAS.

The data reported in chapter 7 provide evidence of increased use of the EFAS in the 1997-2000 period.

A majority of the providers in our survey reported increases in their levels of service, with an average net increase across *all* providers of 5 to 6 percent per year. Data from three other sources reviewed in that chapter also suggest that increases in EFAS use occurred during the 1997-2000 period, although there is considerable variation in the estimated magnitude of the change. We do not have enough information to estimate what proportion of the increase was due to welfare reform and what was due to other factors.

More generally, the available data do not allow us to determine what proportion of the increase in EFAS service was driven by increases in need and what proportion was driven by the increased availability of resources to serve *existing* needs. Table 7.7 shows that about two-fifths of emergency kitchens, one-half of food pantries and emergency food organizations, and three-fourths of food banks and food rescue organizations received more food in 2000 than in 1997. This increased supply of resources could have been largely caused by increased need or could, in part, have occurred due to other factors.

Program Coverage Issues

The data we have presented on kitchens and pantries raise at least two sets of overlapping concerns about the availability of emergency kitchen services to households who need them. These are the adequacy of access to the EFAS for low-income rural residents and to services at different times of the day and week.

Access in Nonmetropolitan Areas

As noted, only about 15 percent of emergency kitchens are located in nonmetropolitan areas, even though these areas account for 21 percent of the overall population living in households with incomes below the poverty line. As a result, while there is one kitchen for every 5,518 people below poverty in metropolitan areas, the comparable number for nonmetropolitan areas is one kitchen for every 9,635 people (table 8.2).

Furthermore, the typical kitchen in a nonmetropolitan area is considerably smaller than its metropolitan counterpart. For example, the median nonmetropolitan kitchen offering lunch serves 45 meals on a typical day, whereas the median kitchen in a metropolitan area serves about 75 meals. Taken with the urban-rural disparity in the ratio of kitchens to people, this implies the number of emergency kitchen meals consumed by nonmetropolitan households is much lower, in proportion to their numbers, than for low-income residents of metropolitan areas.

Interestingly, the disparity in number of providers goes in the other direction for food pantries. An estimated 30 percent are located in nonmetropolitan areas—greater

than the proportion of overall low-income households in nonmetropolitan areas, which, as noted above, is 21 percent.

It is likely that problems of access and transportation costs explain much of the tendency of emergency kitchen operations to locate predominantly in metropolitan areas. It is harder to get a substantial number of clients together at an EFAS facility in a rural setting, with its low population density and limited or nonexistent public transportation. In addition, it is likely to be inefficient and relatively expensive to operate an emergency kitchen with very low volumes. In light of these factors, it probably makes sense to rely more heavily on pantries in nonmetropolitan settings—precisely the pattern that has emerged. Unlike kitchens, pantries usually require only that clients visit the EFAS facility once or twice a month. Nevertheless, the data raise concern that there may be a disproportionate number of rural people who need emergency kitchen services but do not have access to them. It is possible that, to some extent, residents of nonmetropolitan areas rely more heavily on informal assistance from such sources as families, neighbors, and religious groups.

Another possible explanation of the disproportionately low number of kitchens in nonmetropolitan areas is that more of the poor in rural areas are elderly, who may consume less food than their younger counterparts. The elderly also may be less likely to need kitchens than pantries. Conversely, the homeless are apparently more concentrated in metropolitan areas. Burt et al. (1999) estimate that just 9 percent of the homeless are in rural areas.

Table 8.2—Emergency kitchens and pantries relative to number of people below poverty

Location	People below poverty line <i>Millions</i>	Emergency kitchens		Food pantries	
		Kitchens	People below poverty per kitchen <i>Number</i>	Pantries	People below poverty per pantry
All	32.2	5,262	6,081	32,737	984
Metropolitan	24.8	4,494	5,518	23,003	1,078
Nonmetropolitan	7.4	768	9,635	9,734	760
Region					
West	7.8	1,079	7,229	4,943	1,578
Midwest	6.2	1,294	4,791	8,053	770
South	12.5	1,447	8,639	13,122	953
Northeast	5.7	1,442	3,953	6,646	858

Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System (2000) data, weighted tabulations, and Bureau of the Census, Detailed Poverty (P60 Package) for 1999, table 15. At <http://www.census.gov/prod/2000pubs/p60-210.pdf>.

Coverage Differentials Across Regions

Significant disparities in coverage are also observed across regions of the country. As shown in table 8.2, the South appears to have the lowest coverage rates by emergency kitchen providers, with one kitchen for every 8,639 people below poverty. Pantry coverage is lowest in the West, with one pantry for every 1,578 people below poverty. The highest coverage rates are observed for the Northeast for kitchens (3,953 low-income people per facility) and the Midwest for pantries (770 low-income people per facility).

Coverage at Different Times of the Day and Week

Many EFAS providers operate for limited hours. For example, most emergency kitchens are closed on some days of the week and are particularly likely to be closed on weekends. Furthermore, most kitchens do not serve three—or even two—meals per day. Pantries operate in similar ways. The median pantry is open only 2 or 3 days each week and for fewer than 4 hours on these days. These limited pantry hours may create difficulties for some clients, particularly for such

groups as the working poor, who have relatively less flexibility in timing their visits.

These data, particularly for kitchens, raise questions about whether potential clients of the EFAS, including people who live near appropriate EFAS providers, have access to the system *when* they need it. However, the data on hours of operation reviewed here may not tell the full story. We know anecdotally that, at least in some areas, EFAS providers with limited resources attempt to coordinate their service availability; at least one kitchen in a section of a city will thus be open at a given time even if others are closed. Indeed, it is not uncommon at an EFAS facility to see postings of the schedules of other nearby providers. Sharing arrangements may work best in urban areas, with their higher densities of providers. While we lack systematic data on this, the instances we are aware of are in metropolitan areas.

This issue of whether EFAS providers' hours of operation meet the needs of the clients of the system can be addressed more fully in the next phase of the study, when interviews will be conducted with the clients themselves.

Adequacy of EFAS for Meeting the Current Demand

A closely related issue is whether the EFAS has adequate resources to meet the current need for its services. Table 8.3 summarizes information from previous chapters of this report that can be used to address this issue.

The evidence from the previous chapters suggests that the answer to this question of the adequacy of resources for meeting needs is mixed. In particular, many—perhaps a majority—of EFAS agencies report that they currently are able to meet the needs for their services. However, the data also suggest that substantial numbers of EFAS agencies do not at the present time have the staff and supplies necessary to keep up with demand.

Evidence that Many EFAS Agencies Perceive Themselves as Having Sufficient Capacity

The following findings, discussed in greater detail in earlier chapters and summarized in table 8.3, provide evidence that many EFAS providers perceive themselves as having sufficient capacity to meet the current need for their services.

- Substantial numbers of direct EFAS service providers—about three-quarters of kitchens and two-thirds of pantries—indicated that they had not had to turn away clients in need in the previous year. Further, many of the agencies—particularly the kitchens—that had turned away clients cited drug or behavioral problems as the reason, rather than lack of capacity. Pantries frequently mentioned that potential clients had not met income or residence guidelines.
- Similarly, fewer than half of food banks and food rescue organizations reported turning away agencies that requested food. The corresponding number of emergency food organizations was under 20 percent.
- Fewer than 22 percent of kitchens and 40 percent of pantries indicated that they had needed to limit distribution because of lack of food during the previous 12 months. (Slightly more than half of these agencies felt that the limited distribution was a problem in meeting client needs.)
- More than 60 percent of both pantries and kitchens indicated they believed that they would be able to deal adequately with at least a 10-percent increase in demand for their services (and, in many instances, more than 10 percent). This suggests that they

believe they have the resources they need to cope adequately with their current level of demand.

Evidence That Some Agencies May Lack Capacity To Meet Current Demand

The statistics cited above also show that a significant number of providers believe they lack the resources to fully satisfy current demand. For each variable discussed, there were substantial numbers of respondents—usually 10 to 40 percent—who indicated problems in meeting the needs of everyone requesting services.

Furthermore, as shown in table 8.3, approximately 25 percent each of kitchens and pantries, together with more than half of food banks and food rescue organizations, indicated directly that they perceived additional needs for their services that they could not fulfill. Most agencies giving this response said, in reply to a follow-up question, that they would like to be able *both* to provide increased services to existing clients *and* to extend existing services to new groups of clients.

Another factor determining whether client needs are being met is the quality and wholesomeness of the foods served. For instance, even if an emergency kitchen provides food with sufficient bulk to alleviate hunger for the people who come there, the food could still be of limited nutritional quality. Some evidence of this is provided in earlier chapters assessing whether EFAS agencies had to limit the distribution of certain foods during the previous 12 months. Additional information on this issue will be available from questions on the client survey as to how clients perceive the adequacy of the meals they are given.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that a majority of EFAS agencies perceive themselves as having reasonably adequate capacity to meet the service needs that they see in their communities. However, a substantial number of other providers perceive their resources as inadequate for meeting the needs they face.

These findings are subject to some important qualifications. First, the results summarized here pertain only to service areas in which the EFAS providers currently are operating. They tell us nothing about whether underserved areas exist that have no providers at all. Second, the opinions of the providers represent only *indirect* evidence about whether services meet clients' needs. The client survey will examine this issue more directly.

Table 8.3—Possible indications of unmet need

Variables surveyed	Kitchens	Pantries	Food banks	Food rescue organizations	Emergency food organizations
	<i>Percent</i>				
During past 12 months, have turned away people or agencies that requested food	25.2	33.1	42.8	42.0	16.2
Selected reasons for turning people away¹					
Lacked food to serve clients	16.5	16.0	8.3	29.7	21.1
Drug or alcohol problem or behavior problem	70.5	9.4	NA	NA	NA
Came at wrong time or came too often	5.2	27.1	NA	NA	NA
Client/agency ineligible or could not prove eligibility	2.4	41.4	69.2	35.1	68.4
Compared with 3 years ago, how often are EFAS agencies turning away clients due to lack of food?²					
More often	2.2	4.3	8.4	7.7	2.9
Less often	5.1	9.4	5.9	4.6	4.9
About the same	21.0	29.4	32.3	35.4	35.9
Never turn away clients for lack of food	69.5	54.7	51.6	50.8	52.4
Missing data	2.3	2.2	1.8	1.5	3.9
Did agency limit distribution of certain kinds of foods in past 12 months?					
Yes	21.1	38.5	53.9	31.8	32.5
No	77.1	60.2	45.1	67.0	66.7
Missing data	1.7	1.3	1.0	1.1	0.9
Was that a problem in meeting client needs?					
Yes	56.9	59.4	81.2	46.4	60.5
No	42.2	39.5	18.8	50.0	39.5
Missing data	0.9	1.1	0.0	3.6	0.0
Could agency handle a 10-percent increase in demand for their services?					
Yes	68.7	61.3	63.3	62.5	66.7
No	27.1	33.1	33.9	35.2	29.0
Missing data	5.0	5.6	2.8	2.3	4.3
Are there current additional needs for food-related services EFAS agencies are not able to fill?					
Yes	25.1	25.4	52.4	58.0	32.5
No	70.5	71.6	45.1	40.9	66.7
Missing data	4.4	3.0	2.5	1.1	0.9
Perceived additional needs³					
More services to current clients	90.6	86.1	91.8	80.4	81.6
Services to new clients	82.0	80.1	87.4	84.3	92.1
Sample size (number)	1,517	1,617	395	88	117

¹Includes only EFAS agencies that turned away people seeking food during the past 12 months.

²Includes only EFAS agencies operating since 1997 or earlier, based on responses to the question, "When did this agency begin operating at this location?"

³Among those indicating additional need.

NA = Not applicable.

Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey (2000), weighted tabulations.

Providers' Ability To Meet Future Changes in Demand

We also addressed the capacity of the EFAS to respond to changes in need. As shown in table 8.4, most kitchens and pantries believe they could respond successfully to a 5-percent increase in demand, and a majority of them believe that they could also handle a 10-percent increase. When respondents were asked about a 20-percent increase, the number responding positively decreased substantially. Overall, these data seem to suggest that this is at least some measure of capacity in the system to handle increased need, should it arise, but that the capacity is limited.

Reflections on the Role of the EFAS in Relation to the Public Sector

In addition to providing extensive detail on the workings of the EFAS, the analysis in this report has led to a number of important generalizations:

- The EFAS is very extensive. Emergency kitchens serve nearly one-half million meals per day; food pantries distribute the equivalent of roughly 6 million meals per day.
- Despite its large size, the EFAS is dwarfed by Federal Government programs in providing nutrition assistance to low-income people and households. These programs distribute food and provide food assistance that translates into approximately 63 million meals per day.
- Despite a healthy economy and a decline in both the number of people in poverty and in low-income assistance rolls, EFAS providers report that use of EFAS services has grown over the past 3 years.⁷³

The relative sizes of public and private nutrition assistance programs raise three important sets of questions, crucial to understanding overall patterns of food assistance in America:

1. Given the high level of nutrition assistance provided by the Federal Government, why does the EFAS

⁷³Growth is defined differently for different EFAS providers. For pantries, it is an increase in the number of households served; for kitchens, it is an increase in the number of meals served; and for food banks and food rescue organizations, it is an increase in the number of client agencies served.

exist? What needs, if any, does it fill that are not already filled by the public sector?

2. Given the effectiveness of the EFAS, why are public sector nutrition assistance programs needed?
3. Why is the EFAS apparently growing at a time when the poverty rate is going down?

We address these issues in the following sections.

Why Is the EFAS Needed, Given the Extensive Involvement of the Government in Nutrition Assistance?

There are several possible reasons why there is a need for the EFAS despite the available government nutrition assistance programs. They are discussed here.

Because Government Benefits Are Not Large Enough To Meet Needs

One reason that the EFAS is used so extensively is that government assistance program benefits may be too low to fully meet the needs of some of their recipients. In that case, recipients may be looking to the EFAS to supplement the assistance they receive from government programs. Some evidence for this is provided by the fact that substantial numbers of EFAS participants also report receiving food stamp benefits (Second Harvest, 1998). However, there are also people who use the EFAS but do not receive government assistance. Thus, government benefits being insufficient to meet the food needs of low-income people cannot be the only reason the EFAS is needed.

Because Government Programs Are Not Accessible Enough

Another possibility is that the Food Stamp Program and other government programs may not be accessible to everyone who needs food assistance. In order to target benefits specifically to households who need them and to maintain program integrity, the Food Stamp Program and other government assistance programs have established income and assets criteria for participation, along with administrative procedures designed to ensure that these criteria are met. Some potential clients, however, may not be able to meet these administrative or substantive requirements but may still need food assistance.

In addition, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 placed a number of restrictions on the receipt of food stamps by legal immigrants and able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs),

significantly changing prior Food Stamp Program (FSP) rules. As a result, most legal immigrants have been barred from the FSP, and ABAWDs who are not working or participating in an approved work or training program have been restricted to receiving food stamps for 3 months in any 36-month period.

With regard to administrative requirements, some people, such as the poorly educated and the mentally ill, may have trouble understanding and fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements imposed by programs such as the FSP. Similarly, a person without any money or food may not be in a position to wait for assistance until all the FSP administrative requirements are met. (This process often requires 2 or 3 business days, even in cases eligible for expedited service.)

Substantive requirements may also make Federal nutrition programs inaccessible to people needing food assistance. There are a number of ways in which people can be in immediate need of food but not qualify for public food assistance. For instance, someone with a job may have spent the most recent paycheck and need emergency help, but the job may make him or her ineligible for food stamps. Or a recently laid-off person who owns an investment property may not be eligible for stamps because of this asset. However, the person may not be able to immediately liquidate the investment to obtain cash with which to buy food.

Because Some People Prefer Receiving Help From Private Programs

A third possible reason the EFAS is needed is that some people may prefer to get assistance from private sources rather than public programs. Issues of stigma are particularly important in this scenario. For example, some people may be averse to going to a large

public welfare office to apply for food stamp benefits and to being required to provide extensive personal information. They may prefer to obtain food discreetly from a small faith-based pantry where they are asked few questions. Similarly, private sources such as the EFAS may have fewer and less burdensome administrative requirements for obtaining assistance.

Because It's There

To some degree, people may use the EFAS simply because it's there. Given that EFAS providers often offer nutritious food at essentially no price, it is perhaps not surprising that people may use this food as a substitute for, or in addition to, government programs. This is related to the views expressed by Poppendieck (1998), who argues that while the EFAS has done much good, it also has had the unintended (and for Poppendieck, adverse) effect of reducing the pressure on the public sector to provide more adequate assistance. Critics of this explanation argue that it seems unlikely that middle-class people who were not experiencing need would accept the inconvenience, limited choices, and embarrassment often associated with using the EFAS if they didn't need its assistance. This may be particularly true for emergency kitchens, which, by their nature, are seldom inviting places.

Summary

None of these explanations by itself fully explains the existence of the EFAS; it is likely that all are relevant to some degree. Further, the explanations may differ for different types of EFAS providers. The data to be obtained from the client survey component of the current study will shed additional light on the relative importance of these factors, by providing information about multiple program participation and the economic circumstances of kitchen and pantry users.

Table 8.4—EFAS providers' perceived ability to respond to change in need

Amount of Increase	Kitchens	Pantries
	<i>Percent</i>	
Could respond to a 5-percent increase in need	89.5	87.5
Could respond to a 10-percent increase in need	68.7 ¹	61.3 ¹
Could respond to a 20-percent increase in need	41.4 ²	33.6 ²

¹Computed from table 7.13 as the sum of the entries for "10 to 19 percent," "20 to 29 percent," and "30 or more percent" times the percent that could handle at least a 5-percent increase.

²Computed from table 7.13 as the sum of the entries for "20 to 29 percent" and "30 or more percent" times the percent that could handle at least a 5-percent increase.

Note: Respondents providing affirmative answers in higher rows are included in subsequent rows. For example, respondents who believed they could accommodate a 30-percent increase in need are included in all three rows.

Source: National Emergency Food Assistance System Survey (2000) data, weighted tabulations.

Why Is Government Nutrition Assistance Needed, Given the Apparent Effectiveness of the EFAS?

It may be useful to approach the same set of issues from the opposite perspective. In particular, we pose the question of why government nutrition assistance is needed at all, given the apparent effectiveness of the EFAS in serving relatively large numbers of low-income households. We suggest several answers below.

Because the EFAS Probably Could Not Obtain the Resources To Respond To All the Need

As discussed earlier in this chapter, while the operations of the EFAS are very extensive, they are small in relation to the total amount of nutrition assistance provided by the Government to low-income households. Despite its considerable success in fundraising and obtaining food, there is no evidence that the EFAS could obtain the resources needed to assume all or even most of what is currently the Government's role in providing assistance.

Because the Private Sector Cannot Guarantee Entitlement

An additional reason that many observers would cite for relying at least partially on the public sector for food assistance revolves around the issue of entitlement. To the degree that it is a public objective to ensure that every person has access to adequate food, using the Government to provide assistance may be necessary because the governmental approach, unlike private programs, can create legal entitlement to benefits for all who need them. To illustrate, every person meeting certain eligibility requirements in the United States is entitled to receive food stamps—by law, the Government has the obligation to make this assistance available. It is not clear that any comparable situation can exist with a private program. There is nothing in the context of the EFAS—even an expanded EFAS—to guarantee that services will effectively be provided to everybody who needs them. Rather, availability depends on the initiatives of decentralized private sector organizations.

This issue is related to (but not the same as) issues of coverage under the EFAS. We have seen evidence in earlier chapters that there may be disparities in EFAS coverage in different areas, such as those that exist between urban and rural areas. There is no mechanism inherent in the EFAS to guarantee that such disparities will be avoided to provide uniform and universal access to assistance. To be sure, if more resources were channeled to the EFAS under a more privatized

approach to food assistance, presumably at least some coverage disparities would be eliminated. However, the elimination of such discrepancies is not guaranteed in the private context.

Because Some People May Prefer Receiving Assistance From the Public Sector

Just as personal preferences are a potential reason to have some *private* options for assistance, they may also justify having *public* options. In particular, some people may feel more comfortable taking advantage of assistance that they think of as an entitlement, as compared with asking for discretionary private assistance, where they feel that they are at the mercy of assistance providers who have no obligation to help them.

Because the Federal Government May Be Better Able To Transfer Resources Across Areas

Another potential reason for Federal involvement in nutrition assistance is that the availability of resources for providing food assistance and the need for such assistance may not necessarily occur in the same location. For instance, within a metropolitan area, the need for nutrition assistance is likely to be greater in low-income center-city areas, while resource availability may be greater in more-affluent suburban areas. To be sure, there are many elements of the EFAS which serve to mitigate these disparities, including the regional food bank system and the willingness of people to cross municipal boundaries to volunteer their services. But it nevertheless remains the case that the Federal Government, with its national purview, may represent an important mechanism for efficiently linking resources and needs.

Why Has Use of the EFAS Apparently Kept Growing in Recent Years?

A significant puzzle raised by our findings is why the EFAS appears to be growing, despite declining welfare rolls and the strong economy. As we note in chapter 7, there are significant limitations on the available data in this area; it is possible that, overall, the system has not grown. However, the balance of the evidence seems to suggest that it has. What explanations are possible?

The Reasons for the Existence of the EFAS, as Reviewed Above, Are Also Salient to Issues of Change

All the explanations for the EFAS reviewed in previous subsections are germane to understanding why it might be growing over time. By themselves, however, they are only partial explanations, unless we identify changes in

underlying explanatory factors over time. For instance, government benefits being too low to meet the needs of some people may be one reason why the EFAS exists. By itself, however, this does not explain *growth* in the EFAS, unless there has been some *change* in government benefit levels. As it happens, there has, in fact, been a substantial reduction in government benefits, both with the reductions in the TANF caseload and with the reduced food stamp eligibility for legal aliens and able-bodied adults without children. These changes undoubtedly have contributed to growth in the EFAS.

Growth in Incomes of the Very Poor may not have Kept Pace with Overall Income Growth

It is possible that the incomes of people in the lowest part of the income distribution have not risen proportionately to incomes in general, and these people may be heavy users of the EFAS. However, the data cited in chapter 7 on changing poverty rates do not support this as an explanation of increased EFAS usage. Using 50 percent of the poverty level as an indicator associated with the “poorest of the poor,” we noted that the number of people with incomes below that level has *decreased* in recent years (albeit not as rapidly as the number of people below 100 percent of poverty).

The Availability of Food and Other Resources to the EFAS May Have Increased

With the strong economy, it is possible that contributions of food and other resources have become more available over time. Because most food is at least somewhat perishable, if the EFAS is indeed receiving more, it may be distributing it in larger quantities because it cannot easily stockpile current surplus for later use. Thus, increased availability may have

allowed the EFAS to begin to supply a large, but perhaps not visible, reservoir of unmet needs.

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion suggests that, to a substantial degree, public and private food assistance play complementary roles in providing for the needs of low-income people. The bulk of the assistance comes from the public sector, which has the ability to obtain resources by raising public monies to accomplish public objectives. Also, since some of the public programs are entitlements, they serve (at least in principle) the objective of ensuring assistance to all low-income people, regardless of where they live or what organizations they are affiliated with.

However, public programs must impose a measure of rigidity and bureaucratic structure on their operations to ensure accountability and program integrity. The need of Federal programs to serve all eligible persons in all parts of the country equally may also interfere with their ability to be flexible in responding to local needs and to local opportunities for service provision.

EFAS providers are able to be more flexible in providing services and in meeting special circumstances, and in so doing, they appear to fill an important place in the overall food assistance landscape. Further, EFAS services supplement the assistance available publicly for some clients, and the EFAS provides food relief to people who are uncomfortable receiving public assistance.

The planned client survey for the current project will provide additional information on how low-income households use both public and private assistance to meet their food needs.