

**Private Food Assistance in the Deep South: Agency Profiles and Directors' Perceptions of Needs and Opportunities under Charitable Choice**

Suzie T. Cashwell  
Social Work Program Western Kentucky University  
1 Big Red Way  
Bowling Green KY 42101  
suzie.cashwell@wku.edu  
270-745-2929

John P. Bartkowski  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work  
P.O. Box C  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, MS 39762  
bartkowski@soc.msstate.edu  
662-325-8621

Patricia A. Duffy  
Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology  
Auburn University, AL 36801  
pduffy@acesag.auburn.edu  
334-844-5629

Joseph J. Molnar  
Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology  
Auburn University, AL 36801  
jmolnar@acesag.auburn.edu  
334-844-5615

Vanessa Casanova  
Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology  
Auburn University, AL 36801  
fullevc@auburn.edu  
334-844-5629

Marina Irimia-Vladu  
Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology  
Auburn University, AL 36801  
irimima@auburn.edu  
334-844-5629

# **Private Food Assistance in the Deep South: Agency Profiles and Directors' Perceptions of Needs and Opportunities under Charitable Choice**

## *Executive Summary*

With an expanded awareness of the problem of food insecurity during the past two decades, food banking has emerged as an important tool in America's fight against hunger and malnutrition. Food banks are umbrella agencies that centralize food collection and then disseminate their goods to pantries in local communities. This study examines the structure of food banking in two states—Alabama and Mississippi. Given their predominantly rural populations and high proportion of low-income households, Alabama and Mississippi are ideal locales in which to examine this issue.

A key point of departure for this study is the transformation in social welfare provision brought about through charitable choice. The charitable choice provision of 1996 welfare reform law significantly expands the opportunity for public-private partnerships in the provision of social services. In particular, charitable choice enables government entities to provide public funds to underwrite the service programs of faith-based organizations. Because faith communities form the backbone of civic life and benevolence work in much of Alabama and Mississippi, this two-state region is also an outstanding area in which to examine the role of religion in the delivery of food to the poor.

Given these considerations, this study attends to two primary questions: (1) What types of local community agencies provide food assistance to the poor in the Alabama-Mississippi area, and what can we learn about those who serve as directors in these agencies? Moreover, what are the predominant attitudes that such directors hold about poverty and hunger? (2) How receptive and knowledgeable are food agency directors toward charitable choice programs? Specifically, to what extent do Alabama-Mississippi food agency directors demonstrate a grasp

of the general policy contours, specific legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice? To undertake this investigation, we collected primary survey data from a random sample of food pantry directors (n=233) whose agencies are affiliated with food banks in Alabama and Mississippi.

First, because little is known about private food agencies and their directors in these two states, we generate detailed profiles of food agencies in the Alabama-Mississippi area and provide a composite portrait of these organizations' directors. Surprisingly, about three-quarters of the food agencies in our survey are affiliated with a faith community. Thus, religious organizations seem to account for the bulk of food assistance work conducted in Alabama-Mississippi communities. Nearly eight in ten of these faith-based food agencies are affiliated with small and moderately sized congregations, a finding that confounds the common equation of faith-based service provision with large religious organizations. Food providers in our overall sample offer services predominantly to residents of rural communities in this two-state area.

Our demographic profile of food agency directors reveals that they are predominantly white, female, well-educated, and reside in middle-class households. We also asked questions to elicit the social welfare attitudes held by these directors. Most directors attribute poverty to structural causes rather than individual factors. However, an appreciable proportion of directors harbor suspicious views of pantry clients. This finding suggests that a trust gap exists in the provider-client relationship at many food pantries in our study region.

A second goal of our study entailed gauging food agency directors' receptivity toward charitable choice and assessing their awareness of this policy's provisions. It is noteworthy that over two-thirds of the food agencies in our survey do not currently receive government funds. Yet, slightly more than half of them indicate a willingness to apply for public monies in the

future. What, then, do these directors know about charitable choice? In general, food agency directors are woefully uninformed about the general policy contours, key legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice. By most standards, the vast majority of our respondents failed the charitable choice knowledge test posed to them through the survey. The average on this examination hovers around 33 percent. Nevertheless, these findings should not be used to impugn food directors in Alabama or Mississippi. If food directors are undereducated about charitable choice, the fault resides not with the directors themselves but with structural conditions that create an information gap between policymakers, state administrators, and those who are combating hunger and poverty in the trenches of local communities.

The clearest implication to emerge from this study, then, is the need to close the information gap that exists between policymakers who pass new social welfare laws such as charitable choice and service organizations that are presumed to benefit from such policies. To be sure, additional research must be conducted in other parts of the nation to determine if there are broader regional variations or more systematic rural-urban differences in the charitable choice knowledge gap discovered here. Nevertheless, our study suggests that organizations ostensibly empowered by charitable choice must be educated about this policy if they are to make a reasoned choice about its merits and drawbacks.

## **Introduction**

Food banks rose to the forefront of America's fight against hunger during the early 1980s. Food banks are so named because these umbrella organizations serve as centralized warehouses for the collection of emergency foodstuffs. Consistent with the trend of public-private partnership in social welfare provision, food banks are stocked primarily with privately donated foodstuffs, supplemented with commodities provided by the federal government. Privately donated foods may come from growers, manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors, or individuals. Food banks then distribute these goods to member agencies, such as food pantries, meal programs, and shelters—all of whom, in turn, provide them to the poor in a state's local communities on a regular basis.

After the passage of 1996 welfare reform legislation, these nascent manifestations of public-private partnership became increasingly formalized and governed by law. Nowhere has this trend been more clearly evidenced than in the new opportunities given to faith-based organizations by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). A provision in 1996 welfare reform law called "charitable choice" (Title I, Section 104) has unleashed a new wave of public-private partnership in what some call America's "post-welfare era" (Bartkowski and Regis 1999, 2003). The charitable choice provision forbids states that outsource welfare service provision to private entities from discriminating against religious organizations as potential providers in the competitive bidding process. As such, it introduces new funding opportunities—namely, public monies—for a host of religious service providers and changed the rules governing the relationship between faith communities and the state.

This study takes the convergence between the decades-long evolution of food banking and the recent rise of charitable choice as its primary point of departure. Our investigation is

structured as follows. We begin with a brief background on the origins and current status of food banking and charitable choice. We discuss how scholarly analyses of food banking and charitable choice have emerged as parallel research literatures. Our study is the first of which we are aware to connect these issues and study them in tandem. After reviewing these respective literatures, we review the methodology used to conduct our study. We discuss the procedures we employed to collect primary survey data from food pantry directors (n=233) in Alabama and Mississippi. Given the extensiveness of food insecurity and robust levels of faith-based civic engagement in this part of the Deep South, these two states provide an excellent opportunity for exploring the intersection between food provision and faith communities.

We analyze these data with two primary considerations in mind. First, we seek to ascertain the types of local community agencies that provide food assistance to the poor in the Alabama-Mississippi area, and discern key characteristics of those who serve as directors in these agencies. After rendering a demographic portrait of food agencies and their directors in our study region, we examine social welfare attitudes of food agency directors.

Second, we seek to determine the prospects for Alabama-Mississippi food agencies to take greater advantage of charitable choice partnerships with the government. We are particularly interested in assessing pantry directors' grasp of charitable choice. To this end, we test directors' understandings of the general policy contours, key legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice. After reviewing the key findings that emerge from our investigation, we discuss this study's implications for social policy and recommend several directions for future research.

## **Food Pantries: Origins and Obstacles**

The primary goal of food banking is the coordinated provision of emergency food to those who regularly suffer from hunger and malnutrition—now commonly called “food insecurity.” Food banks, centralized organizations through which foodstuffs are collected and disseminated, have become a valuable ally in America’s fight against hunger. In many areas, a food bank functions as a clearinghouse for nonperishable foodstuffs. Food banks collect their goods from various sources—government entities such as the United States Department of Agriculture, and private benefactors including farmers, wholesalers, grocers, and individuals. Once these banks have collected such goods, they are then distributed to various local food assistance agencies—pantries, meal programs, and shelters—that are charged with providing food to those in disadvantaged households.

Situated at the frontline of America’s anti-hunger crusade, local food agencies come in a variety of forms. Some food agencies are secular nongovernmental entities that provide meal sacks periodically to disadvantaged families and individuals. Other food assistance programs are either directly or indirectly connected to religious organizations. Among faith-based providers, food assistance programs are typically implemented by religious congregations or parachurch relief agencies (Bartkowski and Regis 2003: ch. 3). Other food agencies receive indirect forms of support from local religious organizations. Such is the case when congregants volunteer to serve as staff in local food assistance programs, or when food agencies that are not explicitly religious benefit from donations collected during the food drives of religious organizations. Once clients obtain food from these local distribution centers, they prepare it at home. In contrast to soup kitchens and hot meal programs that provide one meal’s worth of food onsite,

food banking focuses on addressing longer-term needs by providing sacks of groceries that can be used over the course of several days.

Food pantries and the banks that serve them were largely unknown before the 1980s. In earlier decades, private food aid was largely limited to soup kitchens in urban areas. These soup kitchens served indigent populations and offered institutionalized assistance as the primary means of doing so. The soup kitchen model of relief was predicated on the preparation and serving of meals on the premises of the local shelter. Food pantries were originally promoted as a response to the double disadvantage felt in needy communities during the 1980s—a protracted economic recession coupled with significant cuts in social welfare expenditures (Curtis and McClellan, 1995). Despite the expanding economy that followed this recession, food drives and other forms of private food aid by local groups quickly became a lasting and common feature of community life (Clancy , Bowering, and Poppendieck, 1991). The growing reliance on private food assistance makes it increasingly important to understand how the system addresses the needs of the disadvantaged individuals and low-income families who use the services.

Some neo-conservative criticisms of government assistance to the poor have portrayed government bureaucracies—particularly federal welfare and child-protection programs—as rule-laden, cumbersome, and woefully out of touch with the particular life circumstances of their clients. These critics charge that welfare-era public assistance programs are bogged down with red tape and deny essential aid to the poor (e.g. Olasky, 1992). For those who view government assistance as cumbersome, detached, and ineffective, private food banks emerged as a promising solution to the hunger problem. The food agencies they serve are private, voluntary organizations that are community-based. As such, the agencies affiliated with food banks are

presumed to be responsive to the particular needs of clients in their local communities. Yet, despite these ostensible virtues, food pantries also have their critics.

Karla Hilton (1993) identifies several disadvantages of food banking as manifested in Winnipeg, Canada. First, while food banks may be an improvement over hot meal programs in terms of the duration of relief they provide, they hardly solve the pervasive and persistent problem of hunger. Foodstuffs provided at local food banks may provide as little two or three days worth of food, and often serve only small numbers of clients. Hence, the rapid growth of food banking may say more about its failings than its successes. Food insecurity has shown itself to be a persistent problem that may not be readily solved with programs that offer modest forms of assistance, including the provision of a few days worth of food. Thus, critics contend that food banks are still a short-term—and shortsighted—attempt to solve a protracted and increasingly pervasive social problem.

Other critics raise a different set of issues by charging that food banks undermine the pursuit of broader goals such as economic justice and genuine social opportunity for the disadvantaged. Janet Poppendieck (1998) has charged that emergency food assistance has reinforced a “get tough” approach to welfare reform by acting as a “moral safety valve.” In this sense, the growth of food banks and other forms of emergency food assistance have enabled politicians to justify dramatic cuts in welfare spending. When welfare cutbacks were initially criticized as unfairly undermining the health and nutritional well-being of its most innocent victims (i.e., children and the elderly), ardent advocates of welfare reform pointed to the “success” of food banking to legitimate the dismantling of the welfare state.

Empirical research on food banking has amplified concerns about the role of food pantries in fighting hunger and has raised additional questions about the success of food banking.

When comparing food pantry users and low-income non-users in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Daponte and colleagues found that pantry users were more likely to have difficulty feeding their families, run out of money for food, and serve less nutritious foods than non-users (Daponte, Lewis, Sanders, and Taylor 1998). These findings are striking because all of that study's subjects—both pantry users and non-users—were situated well below the poverty line. Moreover, given the fact that the median length of use among food pantry users in that study was two years, it revealed that food pantries in the Allegheny area serve households that are marked by chronic hunger rather than emergency food shortages. Debates about the merits of food pantries notwithstanding, both critics and advocates of food banking agree that food pantries were not intended to correct persistent hunger in disadvantaged households. And it now seems that this concern cannot be dismissed as an idiosyncratic finding. Food pantries in upstate New York face a similar situation, with a large number of clients using local pantries for over three years (Clancy, Bowering, and Poppendieck 1991).

Other research suggests that food banking itself is marked by many of the same bureaucratic elements that made government programs such a lightning rod for criticism. Significant increases in the size of food pantries and the number of people served in such pantries can reinforce social distance between the volunteers who staff such pantries and the clients such organizations are supposed to serve. A recent study of food assistance programs in Wilmington, Delaware critically analyzed the “eligibility standards” that have cropped up in many pantries (Curtis 1997). Eligibility standards reinforce a longstanding effort of welfare providers to distinguish between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. Such standards are driven by a number of factors, including a dramatic increase in the demand for food in the wake of welfare expenditure cutbacks and by the expanding use of federal commodities in many

private food assistance programs. Individual states set the eligibility for receipt of federal commodities at anywhere from 100 percent to 155 percent of poverty. Many food pantries use these eligibility standards for receipt of all food, because it is easy and convenient to do so. Irrespective of their source, eligibility standards have the effect of making programs less responsive to the needs of clients and turning them into mirror images of the government programs food pantries were designed to supplant. With findings reminiscent of Batteau's (1983) critical commentary on Food Stamp distribution in Appalachia, Curtis (1997) recounted an instance in which Delaware recipients had lined up in the pouring rain at a church's side door to receive grocery sacks in this faith-based food assistance program.

Similar conclusions emerge from Poppendiek's (1998) seven-year study of emergency food programs. Poppendiek noted an absence of social solidarity or meaningful empathy between volunteers and clients of food assistance programs. In fact, according to this study, clients often face various forms of stigma and humiliation as they seek food from pantries, with food pantry directors and volunteers making arbitrary decisions—on-the-fly value judgments—concerning the eligibility of clients seeking food assistance.

However, recent research underscores the potential limits of such findings. A recent study of East Alabama Food Bank clients found that stigma was not an obstacle to food pantry use in that area (Duffy et al., 1999). In fact, clients reported being treated with respect by pantry directors. Moreover, non-clients living in food-insecure households reported that a lack of knowledge about pantry services—not stigma or humiliation—was the primary reason they did not use a pantry. Such studies indicate that an information gap about food banking, rather than malice on the part of pantry directors, may be the greatest obstacle to greater participation in food assistance programs.

## **Charitable Choice: Faith-Based Initiatives in the Post-Welfare Era**

Charitable choice emerged on the heels of food banking. Food banking and charitable choice are obviously different in many ways. As discussed above, food banking is a coordinated form of service provision that aims to redress a specific need—hunger. Charitable choice, by contrast, is a legislative initiative that affects the funding of service programs. To the extent that charitable choice affects welfare service provision, it does so by making public funds available to private service providers. Moreover, whereas food banking addresses food insecurity, charitable choice affects a broad slate of such social services, including not only food assistance but also homeless shelters and drug treatment programs.

Yet, despite their many distinctions, the evolution of food banking and the emergence of charitable choice are connected by several common threads. Food banking and charitable choice both came of age in an era of government downsizing and welfare cutbacks. Each has served as a critical tool for effecting welfare reform and for improving the provision of social services to the poor in an era marked by public-private collaboration. Even more importantly, charitable choice legislation could represent a boon to food banks and food pantries—notably, for both private secular providers and their religious counterparts. Charitable choice opens the gates for an infusion of public funds into private relief agencies, aiming at it does to “level the playing field” between all sorts of nongovernmental organizations—religious and secular service providers, as well as longstanding and newcomer nonprofits.

What, specifically, does charitable choice purport to accomplish? Charitable choice is a provision of 1996 welfare reform law that seizes on the discretionary latitude associated with federal block grants to states (*A Guide to Charitable Choice* 1997; Bane, Coffin, and Thiemann 2000; Bartkowski and Regis 1999, 2003; Chaves 1999; Cnaan 1999; Griener 2000; Sherman

2000; Walsh 2001; Wineburg 2001). As initially conceived in Section 104 of PRWORA, charitable choice forbids state governments that outsource their services to private nonprofits from discriminating against faith-based providers in the competitive bidding process. Following the passage of 1996 welfare reform law, government funding of faith-based initiatives was slated for expansion at the federal level through the White House's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and sponsorship of the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 (Bartkowski and Regis 2003).

During his election campaign and throughout his presidency, George W. Bush made no secret of his support for faith-based solutions to a wide range of social problems, including poverty and hunger (Bush 2001). Apart from the momentum provided to charitable choice through the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, support for this policy in the Bush administration comes from other quarters. During the tenure of then-governor Tommy Thompson, Wisconsin's implementation of faith-based welfare reform initiatives was rivaled only by that of Texas led by then-governor Bush. Thompson now serves as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. As a senator from Missouri, John Ashcroft, the Bush administration's Attorney General, was a principle architect of the charitable choice provision during welfare reform debates. Although the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 was eventually watered down because of concerns that it might permit discriminatory hiring among publicly funded faith-based providers, the expansion of charitable choice remains at the top of the president's domestic agenda (Bartkowski and Regis 2003). Indeed, the Bush administration has recently stated that it will forge ahead, implementing key portions of its "faith-based initiative" legislative agenda, with or without the approval of Congress (Allen 2002). And, of course, with Republicans having recently become a majority in both the Senate and House of

Representatives after the 2002 mid-term elections, a bill expanding federal support for faith-based initiatives is likely to be more warmly received on Capitol Hill than it was previously.

The language of “choice” in this legislation is designed to underscore the new freedoms extended to faith-based organizations in competition for public purchase-of-service contracts (Bartkowski and Regis 1999, 2003). Secular nonprofit providers have long enjoyed the opportunity to procure government funds to underwrite the services they provide to clients. Hence, one key aim of charitable choice has been to end practices that left faith-based and faith-affiliated nonprofits at a disadvantage in terms of funding sources. Charitable choice ensures that state governments cannot censor religious expression—i.e., religious symbols or practices—among faith-based organizations selected to provide publicly funded social services. Prior to the passage of charitable choice, select faith-based groups that partnered with the government (e.g., Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services) were required to secularize their service delivery procedures before securing public funds.

Yet, choice has a second meaning in the context of this policy initiative as well. Even as it protects the religious expression of faith-based organizations, charitable choice is intended to preserve the civil and religious liberties of welfare recipients. The charitable choice provision mandates that states utilizing faith-based organizations as social service providers offer welfare clients the choice of receiving assistance from faith-based or secular organizations. Thus, client preferences for religious or secular providers must be respected. Moreover, faith-based providers of state-funded social services to the needy cannot legally force their clients to participate in religious practices (e.g., attend prayer groups or worship services). They also cannot require that clients join their religious organizations to receive services. In the end, then, charitable choice policy reflects an attempt to manage the tension between several potentially

competing aims: (1) the state's obligation to provide poverty relief without fostering welfare dependency; and (2) the protection of civil liberties for both religious communities and welfare clients, such that religious organizations may be awarded government monies to provide publicly funded services along with guaranteed protections for the preferences of welfare clients.

Despite the lofty aspirations of the program's architects, the implementation of charitable choice among states has been uneven since the passage of welfare reform and subsequent passage of the Charitable Choice Act of 2001. This unanticipated development is noteworthy because state governments do not have a "choice" about implementing charitable choice if they are outsourcing public services. Any state government that contracts out its services is legally prohibited from discriminating against faith-based providers in the competitive bidding process.

Where, then, does charitable choice implementation currently stand? At the time our survey was administered (2002), policy tracking reports of charitable choice implementation revealed that only fourteen states (28 percent) had formally taken advantage of charitable choice (Sherman 2002). And only about one-third of the states that implemented charitable choice had made any effort to monitor the evolving collaborations between themselves and faith-based providers. Careful monitoring and evaluation is thought to be evidence of a long-term commitment to state government collaborations with faith-based organizations.

Notably, the only Southern states to have implemented charitable choice programs in a consistent fashion are Texas (approximately \$18.3 million dispersed via 19 contracts for 2002) and Virginia (\$2.3 million dispersed via 6 contracts for 2002) (Sherman 2002). Mississippi's now defunct Faith & Families initiative was considered a prototypical charitable choice program when it was begun in 1994 (Bartkowski and Regis 2003). However, Mississippi Faith & Families was not initiated as a charitable choice program per se, but rather through a waiver

obtained from the federal government prior to federal welfare reform in 1996. Consequently, the state governments of Mississippi, Alabama, and many other Southern states have lagged behind their counterparts in sending out requests for proposals to prospective nonprofits (faith-based and secular) to initiate competitive bidding for the procurement of government of services. In short, charitable choice is poised for expansion—particularly if the economy becomes more robust. Yet, there remain a great many questions about the prospect of this policy fulfilling its objectives—the most noteworthy of which is the aim of creating a “level playing field.” According to this logic, charitable choice permits organizations that have previously been excluded from government contracting to be given an opportunity to vie for such funds.

### **Study Objectives**

This study aims to connect investigations on food banking and charitable choice—bodies of scholarship that have heretofore remained parallel research literatures. In this way, we are able to explore the current contours of food banking in Alabama and Mississippi while gauging the future prospects for charitable choice as it relates to food banking in this two-state area. This study provides a cross-sectional portrait of food banking in two states marked by high rates of poverty. The case of Mississippi is particularly striking. Recent data (1996-1998) reveal that 14 percent of all households in Mississippi are characterized by food insecurity—compared with a national rate of 9.7 percent food-insecure households (Bickel, Carlson, and Nord 1999; Nord, Jemison, and Bickel 1999; Rowley 2000). Alabama hovers around a common regional average for the South, with 11.3 percent of its households classified as food-insecure during this period. Mississippi is also among the nation’s leaders in the percent of all families facing persistent

hunger (4.2 percent). On this measure, Alabama fares a bit better than the nation at large (3.2 percent Alabama households with hunger versus 3.5 percent in the U.S.).

### **Profiles of Food Pantries and Their Directors**

Given these demographic characteristics and the basic lack of data about food banking in this region, the first phase of our analysis attends to the following questions:

- What types of local community agencies are affiliated with food banks in the Alabama-Mississippi area? Are they secular or religious in nature? What are their organizational characteristics and what populations do they serve?
- What types of people lead such agencies? Are food agency directors predominantly white or African American, male or female? How educated are they? Do agency directors earn meager or substantial incomes?
- What social welfare attitudes are manifested by food agency directors? Do these attitudes give credence to the concern that food-needy individuals may stay away from pantries because of fear of being stigmatized by mistrustful directors?

### **Agency Directors' Knowledge of Charitable Choice**

The second phase of our analysis proceeds to examine the prospects for charitable choice implementation among food agencies in the Alabama-Mississippi area—from the standpoints of these organizations' directors. With this goal in mind, we ask:

- Do food agencies in our sample currently receive government funds?
- Beyond current rates of public funding, are food agency directors willing to participate in charitable choice programs?

- To what extent do such directors evince a grasp of charitable choice policy? Here, we give specific attention to three dimensions of charitable choice policy:
  - How familiar are food agency directors with the general contours of charitable choice policy? Do they understand the overall thrust of charitable choice?
  - What level of understanding do pantry directors demonstrate of the legal provisions that comprise charitable choice? Do they understand their agency's rights and obligations under charitable choice?
  - How aware are agency directors of the implementation status of charitable choice? Do they know the extent to which charitable choice programs have been initiated throughout the United States?

The research design of this study, implemented as described below, was oriented around addressing these questions.

### **Research Methodology**

This study draws on primary survey data collected from food pantry directors. To develop a profile of food banking in the Deep South and gauge agency directors' knowledge of charitable choice, a list of food bank organizations within Alabama and Mississippi was compiled. From this master list, 250 food pantries were selected randomly from each state. Thus, the total number of food pantries selected was 500. A survey was designed to gauge the organizational attributes of food pantries and demographic characteristics of their directors, to ascertain the social welfare attitudes of pantry directors, and to tap these directors' knowledge of charitable choice. This survey (available by request from the Principal Investigator) was mailed to all of the 500 selected pantries. Return envelopes were provided and coded in order to

decrease second mailing attempts. Overall, there were three mailings completed. Fifty surveys were undeliverable, thereby leaving a possible 450 surveys. Envelopes returned as undeliverable were checked for forwarding addresses. If no forwarding address was on the envelope, follow-up phone calls were made to the agency based on the original list. We omitted any prospective respondent who indicated that he or she was not currently a food pantry director. In the end, 233 surveys were completed and returned. After undeliverable surveys were omitted from our sampling frame, the overall return rate was just over 50 percent. In the analyses that follow, tables with sample sizes less than 233 reflect item-specific nonresponses on returned surveys.

## **Results**

Consistent with the two primary research questions articulated above, our analysis proceeds in two phases. Phase one of the analysis yields a descriptive portrait of food pantries and their directors (sociodemographic characteristics and social welfare attitudes). Phase two of the study reviews pantry directors' responses to the index of charitable choice items. This index gauges directors' grasp of three domains of charitable choice knowledge—namely, the overall policy contours, specific legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice.

### ***Profiles of Food Agencies and Pantry Directors***

Two of the most striking findings of our survey concern the type of organizations affiliated with food banks in the Alabama-Mississippi area and the clientele groups served by these agencies. Among the 233 surveys returned from agencies in our random sample, a sizable majority (75 percent, n= 170) of these are run by or affiliated with faith-based organizations. Respondents were presented with closed-ended categories for congregational sizes ranging from

less than 100 members to over 500 members. Upon inspecting this distribution, it is surprising to find that small and mid-sized congregations form the backbone of faith-based food banking in these states. As revealed in Table 1, small congregations account for approximately 43 percent of faith-based food banking and mid-sized congregations shoulder 38 percent of such efforts. The last column in Table 1 demonstrates that, taken together, congregations of less than 500 members are responsible for 59.2 percent (31.3 percent + 27.9 percent) of all food banking—religious and secular efforts combined—conducted in Alabama and Mississippi. Our survey results suggest that nearly a third of all food banking efforts in these two states (31.3 percent) are undertaken by congregations with less than 100 members.

**Table 1. Size of Congregation Affiliated with Faith-Based Food Agencies**

<i>Congregation Size</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Congregation Size as Percent of Faith-Based Food Agencies</i>	<i>Congregation Size as Percent of All Food Agencies</i>
Less than 100 members	73	42.9%	31.3%
100 – 499 members	65	38.2%	27.9%
Over 500 members	32	18.8%	13.7%
<i>Total</i>	n=170	99.9%	72.9%

NOTE: Among our respondents, 41 were not affiliated with a faith-based organization and 2 who had marked multiple congregation sizes were omitted.

A second set of key findings about Alabama-Mississippi food banking concerns the primary client base of these agencies and their sources of funding. Among the organizations surveyed, the primary area of service was more rural than urban. To wit, 70 percent (n=158) of the pantries identified themselves as serving a primarily rural area while only 30 percent (n=69) indicated that they generally served a metropolitan population. Over two thirds (69 percent, n=161) indicated that they do not currently receive government funds, while 31 percent (n=72) currently underwrite their services with public money. Approximately half of the agencies

surveyed (54 percent, n=116) indicated that they would apply for government funding in the future (or would continue to do so if currently receiving public monies). Only 16 percent of pantry directors (n=35) would not apply for such funds.

Given these organizational characteristics, what do we learn about the directors of such food agencies from our primary surveys? More than half of all food pantry directors in our survey are female (64 percent). The majority of these directors are white (60.5 percent, n = 129), with almost all of the remaining respondents self-identifying as African American (39 percent, n=83). Consistent with faith-based character of agencies in our sample, a majority of food agency directors are highly religious. More than two in three (69 percent, n=161) indicated that they attend church once per week or more often while only a scant 2 percent (n=1) indicated not doing so at all. Tenure among directors ranges widely from those who are nearly brand new at their position (i.e., one month of experience) to tenures of about 40 years. Overall, directors have served in their current position an average of 5.7 years. Directors are generally well-educated, with the vast majority (77 percent, n=180) reporting at least some college (see Table 2). The majority of these directors report annual personal incomes below \$30,000 (56 percent, n=106), while only a handful of respondents had personal incomes of more than \$75,000 per year (2 percent, n=4).

**Table 2. Level of Education among Food Pantry Directors**

<i>Education Level</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Less than high school	9	4.0%
High school diploma	38	16.7%
Some college/tech School	78	34.4%
College graduate	63	27.8%
Graduate degree	39	17.1%
<i>Total</i>	n=227	100%

Household incomes for directors are more evenly distributed (see Table 3). The majority have household incomes below 50,000 (61.3 percent, n=119). However, over 15 percent (n=30) report household incomes of over \$75,000 (n=30) per year.

**Table 3. Household Income among Food Pantry Directors**

<i>Household Income Level</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Less than \$30,000	60	30.9%
\$30,000 – \$49,999	59	30.4%
\$50,000 – \$74,999	45	23.2%
Greater than \$75,000	30	15.5%
<i>Total</i>	n=194	100%

The final portion of our phase-one analysis provides information on the attitudes of food pantry directors toward poverty in general and their clients in particular.

Responses to statements about the causes of poverty are summarized in Table 4. No statement about the cause of poverty received strong support from food pantry directors. About 15 percent of directors agreed or strongly agreed that poverty was caused by prejudice and discrimination. A slightly higher percentage, 24 percent, agreed or strongly agreed that poverty is caused by a lack of good schools for many citizens. Both of these statements reflect structural attributions of poverty. The next two statements are individual attributions of poverty. Around 27 percent of directors agreed or strongly agreed that poverty was caused by a lack of ability or talent in poor people. Eleven percent agreed or strongly agreed that poverty is caused by drunkenness or loose morals. Less than a third of the directors agreed or strongly agreed that we are spending too little money on welfare in this country, whereas nearly 47 percent disagreed or

strongly disagreed with this statement. Thus, a greater proportion of respondents demonstrated a negative view of increased public assistance spending.

**Table 4. Directors’ Attitudes about Poverty.**

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>No Response</i>
Poverty is caused by prejudice and discrimination against minority individuals.	3.4%	12.0%	14.2%	42.5%	24.0%	3.9%
Poverty is caused by the failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans.	3.9%	19.7%	15.0%	44.2%	14.6%	2.6%
Poverty is caused by a lack of ability and talent among poor people.	3.4%	23.6%	9.0%	41.6%	19.7%	2.6%
Poverty is caused by loose morals and drunkenness.	2.2%	8.6%	6.4%	41.2%	39.9%	1.7%
Generally speaking, we are spending too little money on welfare	7.7%	19.3%	24.0%	35.6%	11.2%	2.1%

n=233

Table 5 provides the summary of responses to statements about food pantry clients. Only 18 percent of directors agreed that food pantry use was caused by mere bad luck, and no directors strongly agreed with that statement. A little over half of the directors saw physical disability or sickness as a frequent cause of food pantry use. This result is in line with the self-identified causes for food pantry use in the East Alabama area (Duffy et al., 1999), where about one-third of the interviewed food pantry clients said they were disabled.

About 60 percent of directors agreed or strongly agreed that food pantry clients who are able to work are trying to find work. At the same time, around 32 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there are too many people using food pantries who should be working, indicating there is a sizable minority of directors who may have somewhat negative attitudes toward some of their clients.

**Table 5. Directors’ Attitudes about Food Pantry Use.**

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>No Response</i>
There are too many people using food pantries who should be working.	11.2%	20.6%	17.2%	36.9%	12.4%	1.7%
Many people getting food are not honest about their needs.	12.0%	36.5%	17.6%	28.3%	3.0%	2.6%
Food pantry use is often caused by the sickness and physical handicaps of poor people.	9.4%	42.9%	11.2%	28.3%	6.4%	1.7%
People who use food pantries are just having bad luck.	0.0%	18.5%	17.2%	44.6%	15.5%	4.3%
Most people who use food pantries and who are able to work are trying to find jobs.	9.0%	51.1%	17.2%	17.6%	2.6%	2.6%
Food pantry use is caused by low wages in some businesses and industries.	11.2%	55.4%	12.4%	14.6%	1.7%	4.7%

n=233

This negative attitude appears to be even stronger in response to the statement that many people getting food are not honest about their needs. (It is possible that some directors read this statement as meaning that some clients underestimate their needs, rather than overstate their needs; however the phrase "not honest" would most likely be read as pejorative by most people.) Forty-nine percent of the directors agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. Only 3 percent strongly disagreed. Yet, many of our respondents also seem to believe that poverty is rooted at least partly in structural causes. Around 67 percent of directors believed low wages in some businesses and industries precipitated food pantry use.

***Food Agency Directors’ Knowledge of Charitable Choice***

The second phase of our study gauges agency directors’ knowledge of charitable choice. Directors were presented with statements on the survey that, together, gauged their personal knowledge of charitable choice. Their familiarity with this policy is significant because directors of local voluntary organizations—both secular and faith-based—are at the forefront of America’s fight against poverty and could expand their efforts through charitable choice. The statements in our fifteen-item “quiz” tapped three domains of knowledge about charitable choice:

- general policy contours (i.e., the overall thrust or general objectives of the policy);
- specific legal provisions (i.e., the rights and obligations of faith-based and community organizations under the new law); and
- implementation status (the extent to which programs have been initiated).

Table 6 provides a list of these statements. The correct response to each of these is listed after the statement in capital letters.

Participants were asked to score these questions on a five-point likert-type scale (definitely true, maybe true, not sure, maybe false, definitely false). Individuals were considered to have a correct answer if they selected the appropriate definitely or maybe response. For example, if individuals indicated maybe true or definitely true to the question “Charitable choice refers to a provision found in 1996 welfare reform law,” then they were given credit for a correct response.

So, how did food pantry directors perform on the charitable choice quiz? Generally, the scores were not good. The scores on the charitable choice knowledge test for each respondent have a theoretical range of 0 (no correct responses) to 15 (all correct responses), the mean number of actual correct responses was 5.06. Taken as a group, directors demonstrated little knowledge of charitable choice. It is somewhat heartening that 15.5% of the directors achieved overall scores situated in the 10-14 correct-response category (Table 7).

**Table 6. List of Knowledge Statements on Charitable Choice Quiz.**

<b><i>General Policy Contours</i></b>
1. Charitable choice refers to a provision found in 1996 welfare reform law. [TRUE]
2. Under charitable choice, public funds are to be disbursed through a competitive bidding process in which nonprofit groups submit funding proposals. [TRUE]
3. If religious organizations receive funds from charitable choice in a local area, clients in that area must be given the option of receiving services from a secular provider as well. [TRUE]
4. Charitable choice legislation is so named because it gives states the choice of not complying with its provisions. [FALSE]
<b><i>Specific Legal Provisions</i></b>
5. Charitable choice prohibits government discrimination against faith-based providers on the basis of religion. [TRUE]
6. Faith-based organizations that receive public money under charitable choice can display religious icons and symbols in locations where they provide services to clients. [TRUE]
7. Religious organizations and other nonprofits that wish to participate in charitable choice can be legally recognized as private service providers by becoming incorporated with 501(c)(3) status. [TRUE]
8. Charitable choice requires participating nonprofits to comply with government non-discrimination statutes in hiring staff for their programs. [TRUE]
9. If a religiously-based agency receives funds under charitable choice, the agency is allowed to screen out and withhold services from clients who do not believe in God. [FALSE]
10. Faith-based organizations that receive funds through charitable choice can legally require that clients attend religious events such as prayer meetings, worship, and scripture study to receive social services. [FALSE]
11. Faith-based providers funded under charitable choice can withhold services from clients who refuse to join their religious group. [FALSE]
12. Private nonprofits that accept public funds under charitable choice can be audited by the government. [TRUE]
13. If an agency receives funding under charitable choice, the agency must comply with government non-discrimination statutes in providing services to clients. [TRUE]
<b><i>Implementation Status</i></b>
14. Charitable choice is currently used in all fifty states of the U.S. [FALSE]
15. Because of legislation currently stalled before Congress, religious organizations can no longer seek funds from state governments that contract out their social services to secular nonprofit providers. [FALSE]

Note: Each correct response appears brackets following each statement.

Nevertheless, even the distribution within this category is skewed toward the lower end. As a percentage grade in which 100 percent equals a perfect score, no single director scored higher than 90 percent on the charitable choice knowledge test. In fact, only 100 of the 233 directors in our sample had 50 percent of their responses graded as correct (Table 8).

**Table 7. Distribution of Pantry Directors’ Overall Scores on Charitable Choice Knowledge Test.**

<i>Overall Score (Total Number of Correct Responses)</i>	<i>Number of Directors with Overall Score</i>	<i>Percentage of Directors in Sample</i>
0 – 4	105	45.0%
5 – 9	92	39.5%
10 – 14	36	15.5%
15	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	n=233	100%

**Table 8. Frequency of Correct Responses on Percent Basis.**

<b>Percentage Correct</b>	<b>N</b>
> 50 percent	100
> 75 percent	36
> 80 percent	7
> 90 percent	0

To extend the educational metaphor implicit in the administration of such a quiz, is it correct to assume that directors have overwhelmingly failed this test of charitable choice knowledge? We are hesitant to advance such a charge. To be sure, the scores on the test were low. And, at first blush, the data seem to indicate that pantry directors are misinformed about the policy. However, it is probably more accurate to say that directors are uninformed rather than misinformed. The drawing of such distinctions is not to split hairs. Fifty-seven of the 233 directors (24.5 percent) either did not answer all of the charitable choice knowledge statements (n=12) or marked all answers as unsure (n=45). Further, when examining responses to each statement across subjects, it quickly becomes apparent that the most frequently marked response was “unsure.” This pattern is clearly evidenced in Table 9. Respondents’ lack of knowledge concerning charitable choice is further underscored by several patterns that are difficult to convey in quantitative terms. Many of the returned surveys contained qualitative comments written in by respondents. Through these comments, subjects expressed questions and a lack of

clarity about charitable choice. In addition, several survey respondents requested information about charitable choice from the research team when returning their survey forms through the mail.

Despite this overall state of unfamiliarity with charitable choice, do pantry directors know more about the policy's general contours, its legal provisions, or the implementation status of charitable choice? A careful comparison of the responses within these three domains reveals that pantry directors have the most familiarity with the specific legal provisions of charitable choice (statements 5 through 13). Within this domain of charitable choice knowledge, the percentages of directors selecting correct responses ranged from 28 percent to 58 percent. While these scores are not passing grades, they exceed scores in the two other knowledge domains. The best scores in the specific legal provisions domain surface around an awareness of a funded organization's obligations (statements 8-13). The poorest scores in this particular domain concern an awareness of the rights and opportunities that charitable choice guarantees to funded organizations (statements 5-7). Thus, pantry directors seem to be somewhat aware—though only vaguely so—of the legal responsibilities that their organizations would face if they secured public funding. They are less aware of the new freedoms and opportunities guaranteed to their organizations under charitable choice.

Turning the other two knowledge domains concerning charitable choice, pantry directors are quite uninformed about the overall thrust of charitable choice policy. Statements 1 through 4 tap their knowledge of the policy's general contours. These statements elicited correct responses from between 11 percent and 23 percent of directors. Startlingly high percentages of pantry directors, ranging from 69 percent to 84 percent, were unsure about the policy's general contours.

**Table 9. Percentage Distribution of Correct, Incorrect and Unsure Answers to Statements about Charitable Choice.**

<b>Knowledge Statement (correct response featured in capital letters)</b>	Correct	Incorrect	Unsure
<b><i>General Policy Contours</i></b>			
1. Charitable choice refers to a provision found in 1996 welfare reform law. [TRUE]	12%	3%	84%
2. Under charitable choice, public funds are to be disbursed through a competitive bidding process in which nonprofit groups submit funding proposals. [TRUE]	18%	7%	75%
3. If religious organizations receive funds from charitable choice in a local area, clients in that area must be given the option of receiving services from a secular provider as well. [TRUE]	23%	8%	69%
4. Charitable choice legislation is so named because it gives states the choice of not complying with its provisions. [FALSE]	11%	15%	74%
<b><i>Specific Legal Provisions</i></b>			
5. Charitable choice prohibits government discrimination against faith-based providers on the basis of religion. [TRUE]	46%	6%	48%
6. Faith-based organizations that receive public money under charitable choice can display religious icons and symbols in locations where they provide services to clients. [TRUE]	26%	14%	60%
7. Religious organizations and other nonprofits that wish to participate in charitable choice can be legally recognized as private service providers by becoming incorporated with 501(c)(3) status. [TRUE]	32%	2%	66%
8. Charitable choice requires participating nonprofits to comply with government non-discrimination statutes in hiring staff for their programs. [TRUE]	43%	3%	53%
9. If a religiously-based agency receives funds under charitable choice, the agency is allowed to screen out and withhold services from clients who do not believe in God. [FALSE]	57%	2%	40%
10. Faith-based organizations that receive funds through charitable choice can legally require that clients attend religious events such as prayer meetings, worship, and scripture study to receive social services. [FALSE]	50%	7%	43%
11. Faith-based providers funded under charitable choice can withhold services from clients who refuse to join their religious group. [FALSE]	54%	3%	42%
12. Private nonprofits that accept public funds under charitable choice can be audited by the government. [TRUE]	50%	2%	48%
13. If an agency receives funding under charitable choice, the agency must comply with government non-discrimination statutes in providing services to clients. [TRUE]	58%	2%	40%
<b><i>Implementation Status</i></b>			
14. Charitable choice is currently used in all fifty states of the U.S. [FALSE]	5%	16%	79%
15. Because of legislation currently stalled before Congress, religious organizations can no longer seek funds from state governments that contract out their social services to secular nonprofit providers. [FALSE]	7%	8%	85%

We also sought to gauge directors' knowledge of the policy's implementation status (statements 14 and 15). By far, these items elicit the lowest number of correct responses from pantry directors. Contrary to statement 5, charitable choice had been formally implemented in only fourteen states at the time of our survey. Yet, three times more directors (16 percent) answered this item incorrectly than those who answered correctly (5 percent). Here again, a large portion (79 percent) of all respondents was unsure about the answer to this statement. The second statement concerned with implementation status inquired about the effect that a lack of congressional approval for federal-level charitable choice has on state-level charitable choice programs. In fact, charitable choice programs implemented by these two levels of government are relatively distinct. State-level charitable choice was passed as part of welfare reform law and remains in effect under the block grant system. However, the federal-level Charitable Choice Act of 2001 did not permit broad implementation of federal funding for faith-based and community groups because of congressional opposition. Here, correct and incorrect responses were both low (7 percent and 8 percent, respectively). Again, the vast majority of directors (85 percent) were unsure of the relationship between state-level programs and federal-level legislation.

In short, Alabama and Mississippi food pantry directors—a group whose organizations are supposed to benefit from the new freedoms ushered in under charitable choice—are generally uninformed about this policy. Quite consistently, pantry directors were unsure how to evaluate knowledge statements about the general contours of charitable choice policy, the specific legal provisions that accompany it, or the status of programs implemented under it. Relatively speaking, pantry directors in our sample are best aware of the legal obligations that would be required of them under the policy. However, with nearly half of respondents consistently

uninformed about such obligations and even fewer informed of their rights, such awareness is wanting. Pantry directors are woefully uninformed about the general contours of charitable choice policy and the status of implementation for this initiative.

### **Conclusion**

This study has taken the intersection between food banking and charitable choice as its primary point of departure. In the early 1980s, food banks—umbrella agencies that collect food from various sources and then disseminate it to local pantries—emerged as a means of fighting hunger in the United States. Then, in 1996, charitable choice surfaced as a key provision in welfare reform law. Charitable choice dramatically expanded the opportunity for public-private service provision partnerships and forbade states from discriminating against faith-based providers in awarding government contracts. This study sought to examine the structure of food banking in Alabama and Mississippi while exploring the viability of charitable choice for underwriting food provision in this two-state region of the Deep South.

Drawing on primary survey data collected by mail from a random sample of Alabama-Mississippi food agency directors (n=233), we first presented profiles of these organizations and their directors. We found that a sizable majority (75 percent) of the food agencies in our survey are faith-based organizations. Given this finding, it seems safe to assume that religious organizations account for the bulk of food assistance conducted in these two states. Moreover, the vast majority (79 percent) of these faith-based food agencies are affiliated with small and moderately sized congregations. This finding is surprising because larger congregations are typically viewed as having a more robust base of human and material resources. Among all of the food agencies surveyed (secular and faith-based), services are offered predominantly to rural

residents. Indeed, over two thirds of the agencies surveyed identify rural communities as their primary area of service.

What did we learn about the directors of such agencies? Among our Alabama-Mississippi sample, agency directors are predominantly white and female. Most of them are well-educated, but report fairly modest personal incomes, thereby situating them in the middle class. While the majority of directors did not appear to hold low-income individuals entirely responsible for their poverty, our data reveal that a sizable group of food agency directors is suspicious of clients who seek food assistance. About one half of all directors surveyed believe that clients represent their needs dishonestly when seeking food, and about one third believe that there are too many people seeking food assistance who should be working instead. Such findings suggest that there may be a considerable trust gap between agency personnel and the clients they serve.

A second goal of our study entailed gauging food agency directors' receptivity toward charitable choice and assessing their awareness of this policy. About two thirds of the food agencies in our survey do not currently receive government funds, yet over half are willing to apply for public funding in the future. The knowledge quiz that we administered to food pantry directors through our survey revealed that food agency directors are largely uninformed about the general policy contours, key legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice. If we were to evaluate the results of our charitable choice knowledge test by academic standards, most of our "students"—that is, pantry directors surveyed—would receive a failing grade. With most pantry directors selecting correct answers to only about one of three charitable choice knowledge statements, the "class average" on this examination would hover around 33 percent. However, there was some variation across knowledge domains. Food agency directors were

most knowledgeable (but still only vaguely aware) about the specific legal provisions of charitable choice. They were least aware of the implementation status of this policy.

What conclusions can be drawn from food agency directors' performance on the charitable choice quiz? In our view, Alabama-Mississippi food directors' general failure on this "test" of their charitable choice knowledge should not be used to impugn them or to castigate food assistance provided in the trenches of the Deep South. If food directors are undereducated about charitable choice, the blame for this lack of information should not be laid at the feet of the "students" (i.e., the directors themselves). Rather, the burden of education is always that of the "teacher." In the case of charitable choice education, teachers come in many forms—government officials, policymakers, and community representatives. It is most likely the lack of a coherent pedagogy and inadequate instruction that underlay the failure to disseminate knowledge about such important policy changes to local service providers.

There are three clear implications, then, that emerge from our study. First, there is a stark contradiction between the overwhelmingly religious character of food assistance in the Alabama-Mississippi area and the glaring lack of initiative that both states have demonstrated toward charitable choice. Although Mississippi had implemented a church-state collaboration that was a forerunner of charitable choice (Mississippi Faith & Families) (see Bartkowski and Regis 2003), that initiative is no longer active. In fact, neither Alabama nor Mississippi has emerged on the radar of those who track the many charitable choice efforts that are being forged elsewhere after welfare reform. We are left to wonder about the motivations underlying government inaction or lack of coordination when a sizable network of religious providers is already in place to offer food assistance to food-insecure populations. Perhaps states whose congregations are already actively involved in such work do not feel a sense of urgency in forging charitable choice

partnerships—at least in a way that can be clearly tracked by those monitoring implementation. Given the uneven implementation of charitable choice in the nation at large, and the apparent absence of such programs in the Deep South, a national study is needed to identify the structural factors that facilitate and hinder the forging of charitable choice partnerships.

Second, the foregoing argument does not preclude the emergence of possible problems if charitable choice partnerships are forged. Our study revealed that a sizable group of food agency directors question motivations for pantry use among the food-insecure population. Hence, there seems to be trust gap between many food directors and clients they serve. Additional research—both quantitative and qualitative—is needed to determine the character and source of these suspicions. How do these suspicions emerge among food pantry directors, and do they lead to the stigmatization of pantry clients in the everyday practice of food provision? Given the high incidence of religious organizations and rural pantries in our sample, it is possible that suspicions about clients’ motivations for seeking food assistance are rooted in religious ideologies or rural beliefs that distinguish between the “deserving poor” and their “undeserving” counterparts. Yet, we are unable to draw such conclusions. Additional studies are needed to explore these options.

Finally, it is plainly clear that food directors in Alabama and Mississippi have not been well-informed about charitable choice. In this regard, food assistance in the Deep South seems far removed from the beltway of American politics. And yet, we cannot be sure that food directors in Alabama and Mississippi are any less informed than their counterparts in other parts of the country. Thus, there is a need for more comprehensive data that only a broader, more comparative study would provide. This line of research could be attacked in a number of different ways. On the one hand, it is possible that food directors are less informed about charitable choice than leaders in other sectors of the welfare provision network (e.g., directors of

child care centers, substance abuse counselors). If some sectors of the social service delivery “industry” are more knowledgeable about charitable choice, efforts should be made to inform all parties who are supposed to benefit from this revolutionary policy about it.

On the other hand, there may be regional gaps in charitable choice knowledge—and these will likely mirror the actual implementation and opportunities for implementation of charitable choice programs. Consequently, future work is needed to determine if food agency directors in the South are actually less informed about charitable choice than their counterparts in other regions of the country. From our study alone, we cannot determine how Alabama-Mississippi pantry directors compare with food agency supervisors in other parts of the country. If a broader comparative study were undertaken, care should be exercised to account for the fact that the South is comprised of more rural communities and fewer large cities than many other regions of the country. Hence, spatial variations in charitable choice policy knowledge and opportunity may be rooted in both regional differences (e.g., South, Northeast, Midwest) and distinctions that characterize different types of community locales (e.g., rural versus urban areas). Here again, scholarship is needed that aims to identify structural differences that create knowledge and opportunity gaps for those living in communities far removed from the centers of policymaking in America (state capitols, Washington, D.C.). It is only through such scholarship and corrective efforts that the “level playing field” proposed by advocates of charitable choice can even be reasonably considered.

For the time being, our study demonstrates that there is much to be done before charitable choice can be said to have effectively lived up to its name and before food banking can fulfill its mandate. The directors of food agencies and other organizations ostensibly empowered by charitable choice must be educated about this novel policy initiative. Such a conclusion is

clearly supported by our study of food banking in Alabama and Mississippi. And, given the uneven implementation of charitable choice throughout the nation at this time, we suspect that this conclusion would be borne out in many other parts of the country as well. It is only through proactive and diligent education efforts that the presumed beneficiaries of charitable choice will be able to make reasoned choices about the new opportunities available to them in America's post-welfare era.

## References

- A Guide to Charitable Choice: The Rules of Section 104 of the 1996 Federal Welfare Law Governing State Cooperation with Faith-Based Social-Service Providers*. 1997. Washington, DC: The Center for Public Justice, and Annandale, Virginia: The Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.
- Allen, Mike. (2002). 'Faith-Based' Initiative to Get Push. *The Washington Post*, August 31, p. A1.
- Bane, Mary Jo, Brent Coffin, and Ronald Thiemann, eds. 2000. *Who Will Provide? The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press.
- Bartkowski, John P., and Regis, Helen A. (1999). *Religious Organizations, Anti-Poverty Relief, and Charitable Choice: A Feasibility Study of Faith-Based Welfare Reform in Mississippi*. Arlington, VA: Pricewaterhouse-Coopers Endowment for the Business of Government. (On-line) <http://www.endowment.pwcglobal.com/pdfs/bartkowski.pdf>
- Bartkowski, John P., and Regis, Helen A. (2003). *Faith, Hope, and Charitable Choice: Religion, Race, and Poverty in the Post-Welfare Era*. New York: New York University Press.
- Batteau, A. (1983). Rituals of dependence in Appalachian Kentucky. In A. Batteau, Ed., *Appalachia and America*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Bickel, Gary, Steven Carlson, and Mark Nord. (1999). Household Food Security in the United States, 1995–1998 (Advance Report). Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.
- Bush, George W. (2001). "Rallying the Armies of Compassion." Washington, D.C.: The White House. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/faithbased.html>
- Chaves, Mark. (1999). Religious congregations and welfare reform: Who will take advantage of Charitable Choice? *American Sociological Review* 64, 836–846.

- Clancy, K., Bowering, J. and Poppendiek, J. (1991). Characteristics of a random sample of emergency food program users in New York: I. Food pantries. *American Journal of Public Health*, 81, 911-914.
- Cnaan, Ram A. (with Robert J. Wineburg and Stephanie C. Boddie). 1999. *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Curtis, K.A. (1997). Urban poverty and the social consequences of private food aid. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 19(2), 207-226.
- Curtis, K. and McClellan, S. (1995). Falling through the safety net: Poverty, food assistance and shopping constraints in an American city. *Urban Anthropology* 24, 93 –135.
- Daponte, B., Lewis, G., Sanders, S., and Taylor, L. (1998). Food pantry use among low-income households in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. *Journal of Nutritional Education*, 30, 50-57.
- Duffy, P., Molnar, J., Claxton, L., Hallmark, G., Bailey, C., and Miklouchich, S. (1999). Private Food Assistance in East Alabama: Issues of Access and Need. Mississippi State University: Southern Rural Development Center, Project Report. (On-line)  
[http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc/activities/duffy\\_finalreport.htm](http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc/activities/duffy_finalreport.htm).
- Griener, Gretchen M. 2000. “Charitable Choice and Welfare Reform: Collaboration between State and Local governments and Faith–Based Organizations.” *Welfare Information Network*, Volume 4, Issue 12. <[www.welfareinfo.org/issuenotecharitablechoice.htm](http://www.welfareinfo.org/issuenotecharitablechoice.htm)>
- Hilton, Karla. (1993). Close down the food banks. *Canadian Dimension*, 27(4), 22-23.
- Nord, Mark, Kyle Jemison, and Gary Bickel. (1999). Measuring Food Security in the United States: Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger, by State, 1996–1998. Economic Research Service, USDA.

- Olasky, Marvin. 1992. *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc.
- Poppendieck, Janet (1998). *Sweet charity? : Emergency food and the end of entitlement*. New York: Viking.
- Rowley, Thomas D. (2000). Food Assistance Needs of the South's Vulnerable Populations. Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University.
- Sherman, Amy L. 2000. *The Growing Impact of Charitable Choice: A Catalogue of New Collaborations between Government and Faith-based Organizations in Nine States*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Justice.
- . 2002. *A Report on Charitable Choice Implementation in 15 States*. Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute. <[www.hudsonfaithincommunities.org](http://www.hudsonfaithincommunities.org)>
- Walsh, Andrew, ed. 2001. *Can Charitable Choice Work? Covering Religion's Impact on Urban Affairs and Social Services*. Hartford, Conn.: Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life.
- Wineburg, Robert J. 2001. *A Limited Partnership: The Politics of Religion, Welfare, and Social Service*. New York: Columbia University Press.