

Food Banking in the Deep South: Profiles of Clients and Directors

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In the Shadows of Poverty

Memphis, Tennessee

July 21-23, 2004

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of food pantries in the Deep South. Using data collected from a survey of food pantry directors in Mississippi and Alabama, we describe the types of people who provide leadership at pantries and how they view the population they serve. The experience of a sample of pantry clients is addressed using survey data from the clients of 12 food pantries in East Alabama.

The rise of food pantries as a means of combating food insecurity among vulnerable populations is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the early 1980s, private food aid in this country was largely limited to soup kitchens in high-poverty urban areas. Because the widespread use of food pantries is such a recent development, research into this method of alleviating hunger and food insecurity is not extensive.

Our data sets provide detailed information about both clients and directors of Deep South pantries. The client study assessed the experiences of food-insecure individuals who used 12 food pantries affiliated with the East Alabama Food Bank, part of America's Second Harvest network. In all, 96 pantry clients were asked detailed questions about their economic and demographic characteristics and their experiences at pantries. A large portion of the sample had minor children living at home. Many were single mothers. A sizable sub-group of non-metro pantry users consisted of elderly people. The majority had incomes less than \$15,000 per year, with residents in the more rural areas somewhat more likely to be in the lowest income brackets. Food pantry users reported a high level of satisfaction with the services received.

A second set of primary data was collected to gauge the organizational attributes of food pantries and the demographic characteristics of their directors. Five hundred food pantries in Alabama and Mississippi, two of the nation's poorest states, were randomly sampled, with 235 agencies responding. Nearly three-quarters of the agencies reported being run by or affiliated with faith-based organizations. Directors themselves reported a high level of religious activities.

Among the organizations surveyed, the primary area of service was more rural than urban. About 80 percent of those responding to this question identified themselves as serving primarily a non-metropolitan area (rural area, small town, or city of less than 50,000). Just over 60 percent of all food pantry directors in our survey are female. The majority of these directors (63 percent) self-identified as white, with the remaining respondents self-identifying as African American (37 percent).

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Introduction

Before the early 1980s, private food aid in this country was largely limited to soup kitchens in high-poverty urban areas. In the 1980s, however, in the face of a changing federal policy direction coupled with a deep recession, private emergency food systems expanded to include more rural areas and to offer a wider variety of food assistance. Food pantries are local agencies that provide groceries for clients to take away and prepare at home. Most are associated with an area food bank, which receives donated products from private sources and from the U.S. government. Pantries purchase food from their central food bank at a nominal fee, sufficient to cover transportation and handling charges. In most food pantries, clients receive a box containing staples such as pasta, cereal, crackers, instant potatoes, beans, rice, canned goods, and perhaps some meat or other fresh foods. Pantries were originally promoted as a response to a short-term crisis in the 1980s (Curtis and McClellan, 1995), but food drives and other forms of private food aid by local community groups have become a lasting and common feature across the U.S. (Clancy, Bowering, and Poppendieck, 1991).

A particularly interesting phenomenon occurred during the late 1990s. While food stamp program participation fell dramatically, the demand for food pantry services increased. Findings from surveys in over 30 major cities suggest that requests for emergency food assistance by families with children rose through the late 1990s (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1998, 1999, and 2000). The link between welfare reform and these reported increases in food bank services use is not well understood; however, in some cases directors of the pantries do cite welfare reform as a contributing factor (Eisinger, 1999).

Given that food pantries appear to be emerging as an important part of the nation's social safety net, research on how they function and whom they serve is needed for a full understanding of how vulnerable populations cope with food hardship. Although some recent research has focused on food pantries, the literature in this area is still relatively sparse compared to that on other food assistance programs, such as the food stamp program and WIC. Because the Deep South has historically high levels of poverty and low-levels of government assistance to the poor, private food assistance may be of especial importance to the vulnerable populations in this region.

The objective of this study is to provide information on both the type of people who serve as directors of food pantries in the Deep South states of Alabama and Mississippi and to profile food pantry clients served by the system. A mail survey generated primary data on the pantry directors, while food pantry clients in East Alabama were interviewed face to face. Food pantry clients interviewed visited pantries affiliated with the East Alabama Food Bank (EAFB), part of the Second Harvest system of food banks. The EAFB serves several counties in east central Alabama and covers a mix of rural and urban communities. Results of this study should provide insights into how the food pantry network functions, what types of people in the community direct the pantry agencies, and what type of people are served by pantries.

Literature Review

While research on food pantry use is not as extensive as research into the use of government food assistance programs, the literature in this area is growing. Several published studies provide insights into who is using food pantries in the United States and why they need them. Taren et al. (1990), for

example, interviewed low-income families in Hillsborough County, Florida, to determine factors related to food consumption. Roughly half the sample families received food stamps and 12 percent used a food pantry. Results indicated that the end of the month was associated with the most food shortages.

Daponte et al. (1998) compared 400 food pantry users and low-income non-users in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Respondents were interviewed between April and July 1993. All respondents were below 185 percent of the poverty level. Results showed that pantry clients are more likely to have difficulty feeding their families, run out of money for food, and serve less nutritious foods than non-clients. The median length of food pantry use was two years. Thus, food pantries in this area were clearly serving more chronic cases as opposed to the emergency cases they were created to serve. Most of the pantry clients in this study accessed the pantries by walking and only 26 percent owned a car.

Clancy, Bowering, and Poppendieck (1991) profiled the characteristics of food pantry clients in the New York City and Upstate New York areas. The food pantry clients in the Upstate New York sample were disproportionately white females with children. By contrast, the city sample had a larger percentage of older African-Americans, without children at home. The Upstate sample had more long-term clients (more than 3 years) than the city group, suggesting that rural people may have fewer options for improving their food security over the long run than do urban residents.

Chronic, rather than short-term, use of food pantries has also been found in studies in other parts of the nation. Biggerstaff, Morris, and Nichols-Casebolt (2002), studying food pantry clients in Virginia, reported that the majority of users interviewed had characteristics that made it likely they would not be able to meet basic family needs in the long term without additional support. A large percentage of their study subjects had less than a high school education and many were single parents. Bartfeld (2003) analyzed Wisconsin single mothers who used food pantries. Most had low education levels, low household income, and often experienced an array of hardships. For many of these respondents, food pantry use was an on-going strategy to meet food needs.

America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest network of food banks, profiled the characteristics of their clients (America's Second Harvest, 1998). Of client households, 67 percent had an annual household income of less than \$10,000. Many clients were unemployed or disabled. For only 28 percent of households was employment the main source of income. Thirty-seven percent of all clients were unemployed, 21 percent were working, 21 percent were disabled, and 12 percent were retired. Thirty three percent of all households served were single parent households. Forty percent of clients received food stamps, but many reported that the stamps do not last the entire month. Thirty-nine percent of food stamp recipients reported having their benefits cut. Of those who do not have food stamps, nearly 40 percent had applied and were waiting for approval. Twenty seven percent of clients reported that adults in the households had skipped meals in the past month, because of lack of resources to obtain food. In 9 percent of the households, children had skipped meals. Many clients also lacked basic household amenities. Twenty four percent of clients reported having no stove, 43 percent no telephone, and 60 percent no car.

Critical Views of Food Banking

One vein of thought sees food banks as playing a negative role in the community. Hilton (1993) summarizes some critical perspectives on food banking in the context of hunger in Winnipeg. The

initial idea for Winnipeg food banks came from various social welfare agencies that were having difficulty with people coming to them with food problems. One of Hilton's informants comments:

"So the whole idea for food banks was literally a top-down response to the issue of poverty and lack of food. I think now that communities are becoming more active, the grass roots people, even the users of food banks, are saying that food banks wouldn't have been their response if they had been involved initially."

Hilton argues that food banks contribute to a cycle of dependence and poverty, which leaves many people feeling hopeless. Food banks thus become part of the long-term poverty problem, because they shift the focus away from the structural inadequacies of the welfare system and government's responsibility to create viable economic opportunities for its citizens.

Because food banks were originally modeled as a short-term, immediate solution to the widening number of people without adequate resources to feed themselves, their growth, Hilton maintains, is more a testament to the project's failure than to its success. She asserts that food banks add to the difficulty of mobilizing people who rely heavily on them. Another one of Hilton's informants comments, "I think the dependency they create makes it difficult to organize people. People who have been going to food banks year after year after year are very difficult people to get excited about the issue."

To counter the risk of dependency, one Winnipeg food bank opted to limit the food bank service to one day per month, providing in its place a "food club" where people can purchase food stuffs at wholesale prices. Purchasing in bulk from suppliers, the food club is an alternative to food banks, an attempt to stretch people's food dollars so they do not have to rely so heavily on food banks.

Critics are not satisfied with the role food banks play in the community, providing small amounts of food to small groups of people. Instead of helping people become economically independent, some feel that food banks do the opposite by further reinforcing the message that people are unable to provide for themselves (Poppendieck 1998).

Other criticisms include the increased bureaucracy that has emerged with the success of food banking. Curtis (1997) concluded that the increase in size of food pantries and in the number of people served, has created more social distance between volunteers and clients. Poppendieck's (1998) seven-year study of emergency food programs came to similar conclusions. She says that the social distance between volunteers and clients has contributed to the stigma associated with using food pantries. Food pantry directors or volunteers make decisions about who is eligible to receive food based on their own judgment of the situation. Poppendieck says that clients are often humiliated when denied assistance by a suspicious director.

In short, critics argue that food banks do a good job of covering up the poverty crisis. Although in a much different context, a recent Conference of Mayors survey similarly identified low-wage jobs as the top cause of hunger (U.S. Conference of Mayors 1998). Both food bank supporters and critics probably would agree that hunger is a symptom of more fundamental flaws in the economic system. Whatever their long run consequences in improving the lives of impoverished people, food pantries are clearly an important new source of support for those at the bottom of the economic strata. Gaining a clearer understanding of the operation of food banks, and of the clients they serve, is therefore a critical area of research.

Food Pantry Directors

Using a list compiled from Food Bank organizations within Alabama and Mississippi, 250 food pantries were selected at random from each state. A survey, which examined (among other issues) demographics of pantry directors and their attitudes about poverty in general and food pantry clients in particular, was mailed in January, 2002, to all 500 selected locations. Return envelopes were provided and coded to decrease second mailing attempts. Overall, there were three mailings completed. Fifty surveys were undeliverable leaving a possible 450 surveys of which 235 were returned. Envelopes that were returned 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 those who indicated that they were not food pantry directors. The overall return rate was just over 50 percent.

Director Characteristics

Our survey data indicate that about two-thirds of food pantries in Alabama and Mississippi are church sponsored organizations. Additional pantries, while not sponsored by a religious organization, were affiliated with one, bringing the total percentage of pantries either run by or affiliated with a religious organization to around 75 percent. More than half (128) of the pantry directors responding to this item identified themselves as serving a primarily rural area or a small town while 20 percent (44) indicated that they served an MSA, and the rest (30 pantries) served a mid-sized city of 30,000 to 49,999 people.

Table 1 provides information about the characteristics of pantry directors. About two-thirds (64 percent) of pantry directors responding to our survey are women (table 1). Over 60 percent of the directors identified their race as Caucasian, while 37 percent self-identified as African American. Only 4 percent of directors reported less than a high school education, while 44 percent of directors held a college or graduate school degree (table 1). Household income of pantry directors has a wide range. Twenty-one percent of directors report household income below \$20,000 a year, while 5 percent report income in excess of \$100,000. Most, however, report, income in the median range.

Directors generally reported a high level of involvement in religious activities. Eighty-six percent of pantry directors indicated that they attend church once a week or more (Table 1). Only four directors (2 percent) indicated no church attendance.

In summary, a food pantry director in Alabama and Mississippi is likely to be a well-educated, white woman, with moderate household income. She is highly involved in church activities, and the pantry she directs is likely to be associated with a church. She believes that her pantry serves mostly a non-metro population.

Attitudes toward Clients

A question that has long been of interest to many researchers studying food assistance programs is the degree to which fear of stigmatization may prevent food-needy people from using available resources. The food stamp program has been more extensively studied than any other food assistance program in this respect, but results are mixed (Ranney and Kushman, 1987; Coe, 1983). Studies of the impact of stigma on deterring people from food pantry use are limited, and often rely on the researchers'

observation of the particular environment in one or more pantry settings (see, for example, Curtis 1997).

In our survey, directors were asked several questions about their attitudes toward food pantry clients in particular and poverty in general. Some of the statements link poverty to structural issues in society (poor schools or discrimination) while others attribute poverty to personal failings. The directors' responses to these statements about the causes of poverty are summarized in Table 2. 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, 23 percent, agreed or strongly agreed that poverty is caused by a lack of good schools for many citizens. 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. Despite serving clients for whom the government provided safety net was clearly insufficient for meeting food needs, most directors disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table 3 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. Nearly 60 percent of directors agreed or strongly agreed that food pantry clients who are able to work are trying to find work. At that same time, around 32 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there are too many people using food pantries who should be working. Whether these directors believe that the respondents are responsible for not finding jobs, or whether they believe the problem lies in macroeconomic conditions (e.g. high unemployment) cannot be determined from the response to this item.

In response to the statement that "many people getting food are not honest about their need," 49 percent of the directors agreed or strongly agreed. Only 3 percent strongly disagreed. Hence, about half the directors responding to this survey indicate a fairly substantial level of distrust of their clients' honesty. On a more positive note toward the client, some 66 percent of directors believed low wages in some businesses and industries precipitated food pantry use.

Food Pantry Clients in East Alabama

It is important for providers in the emergency food service agencies to understand the special needs and problems of their clients. It is also important that policy makers and members of the general public understand the situations of food bank users. Otherwise, state and federal policy that directly affects the well being of the nation's most vulnerable citizens risks being shaped by distortions. Disseminating accurate information about those at risk for food insecurity is particularly important in the Deep South, given the region's long history of high poverty and low state support for anti-poverty programs.

The East Alabama Food Bank (EAFB), the focus of our study, is a subsidiary distribution organization of the Montgomery Food Bank. In turn, both agencies are part of the Second Harvest network. The EAFB provides food to agencies, such as churches and other organizations serving as food pantries, which in turn distribute food to clients. To be eligible to become a member agency of a

food bank, the organization must have a feeding program that serves the needy, ill or infant. The member agency must have a 501(c) 3 letter from the IRS. Agencies that make application for participation in the East Alabama Food Bank agree to follow prescribed guidelines concerning record keeping and the qualifications of food recipients. Regular reviews and site visits monitor activities of the agencies. Sites that do not follow guidelines can be suspended or terminated from the EAFB.

Member agencies purchase food from EAFB for \$0.14 per pound and distribute it without charge to needy individuals and families. EAFB handles all forms of food, including fresh produce, frozen and dry foods. Agencies of the East Alabama Food Bank are found in Lee, Macon, Chambers, Tallapoosa, Bullock, Randolph, and Russell Counties, with the greatest concentration of member agencies in Lee County. The five surrounding counties in its service area are some of the poorest in Alabama. One county -- Macon -- has the highest proportion of black population in the nation. Another county has consistently lost population for six decades, before recording a small percentage gain in the 1980's due to the construction of a state prison there. The urbanized portion of Lee County, where the East Alabama Food Bank is located, has two neighboring cities (Auburn and Opelika) with combined populations of over 50 thousand people, with over 95 thousand estimated for the county as a whole. The Auburn-Opelika metro area also hosts a major university, Auburn University, and a branch campus of a state junior college, Southern Union.

Using probability in proportion to size methods, a sample of 12 food pantries was selected, 6 from the Auburn-Opelika metro area and 6 from the rest of the EAFB service area. A sample of ten clients from each pantry location was selected to be interviewed. These individuals were surveyed via a face-to-face interview using a standardized instrument. After refusals and no-shows, a total of 96 clients were interviewed.

We addressed the following points in the survey:

- * Demographic characteristics of the clients including family size, age of family members, race, and education levels.
- * Economic characteristics of the family, such as sources and amount of household income, including transfer payments.
- * Reasons for need of the pantry, such as disability, unemployment, low wages, or loss of welfare benefits.
- * Level of food hardship in household.
- * Transportation needs and availability, such as age and make of family car and closeness to bus routes.
- * History of food pantry use including how often the client uses the pantry, what food items are received, how long the client has used the pantry and how far he or she must drive or walk to use the pantry.
- * Perceived obstacles to the client's pantry use, including how pantry hours fit schedules, whether distance to the pantry poses a problem, whether food that the client likes and knows how to prepare is available, and the client's own assessment of any stigma associated with pantry use.

The Pantries in Our Study

The EAFB area was typical of the broader region in that the majority of food pantries drawn for our

sample (10 out of 12) were associated with churches or religious groups. We found that running a food pantry has provided rural ministers a material base for helping people in the local environment where only informal or sporadic patterns of assistance have been practiced in the past. Establishing a food distribution program as a formal and regular program gives the rural church a tangible mechanism for helping those in need. EAFB provides a template for conducting food distribution, and its rules for record-keeping and qualification of recipients provide a somewhat standardized framework.

Although America's Second Harvest and EAFB specify certain record keeping and qualification procedures for food recipients, there is a high degree of variability in compliance and realization of these procedures. Agencies located in the Auburn-Opelika metro area tended to be more structured and to have more clearly defined guidelines about eligibility requirements, the amount of food a person can receive, and the number of times in a given period a person can receive food. One metro EAFB agency selected for our study was a branch office of a large national social welfare organization, staffed by personnel largely from outside the community. When individuals approached this agency for food, the potential recipients were asked to go first to the county office of the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) for a referral slip.

By contrast, some pantry directors reported delivering food to those unable to drive or otherwise without transportation. Every one of the six non-metro agencies had delivered food at some point, compared to only one metro agency. Some non-metro directors even take food to those who they know are in need but will not ask for assistance. The metro-area directors in our survey did not report delivering food, although we do know that at least one metro-area pantry, not chosen for our survey, does provide delivery to the homebound.

Half of the directors at the Auburn-Opelika sites reported an increase in the number of people using the food pantry and indicated that they believed this increase could have resulted from changes in eligibility for food stamps stemming from the 1996 welfare reform legislation. Only one of the six non-metro sites reported an increase in users because of food stamp reductions. Another non-metro site reported an increase in use of the pantry, but did not attribute the increase to be a result of the 1996 Act. One of the non-metro pantry directors said he thought welfare reform was greatly needed and did not think it has affected his clients in a negative way. Overall, the directors of non-metro pantries did not seem to be as concerned that welfare reform would negatively affect their clients.

No directors reported reductions in TANF benefits as a reason for clients using the pantry. Because of the very low cash welfare benefits that have long prevailed in Alabama, participation rates have been low historically. Further, at the time of our survey (1999), the five year time limits had not yet been reached.

Client Profiles

General descriptive characteristics of respondents are reported in tables 4 and 5. The majority of respondents were female (table 4). Since poverty has largely been "feminized" in the United States, the dominance of female respondents was not unexpected. However, these very high proportions may also reflect the traditional southern view that food and meal preparations are a woman's concern. The respondents covered a wide range of ages, with a higher percentage of non-metro respondents in the upper age brackets. Although the difference in ages was not statistically significant when all age categories are included in the statistical test, the percentage of clients over age 60 is significantly

different across regions. Twenty-four percent of non-metro clients were over sixty, compared to 10 percent of the metro respondents. Household sizes varied from one individual to 14, with most of the respondents living in households of 2 to 6 people (table 4).

Employment information is presented in table 4. Pantry clients in the Auburn-Opelika area reported low rates of full-time employment (15 percent), while pantry users in the non-metro areas reported a slightly higher full-time employment rate (22 percent). Some respondents reported working part time, but the majority of respondents were not working for wages. Among those clients who reported working for wages, the difference in type of employment (full-time versus part-time) was significantly different depending on metro or non-metro status. About a third of respondents reported that they were disabled, and another 6 to 10 percent reported they were retired.

The majority of the sample reported having children under 17 living in the household (table 5), with 72 percent of metro clients responding affirmatively to this question, compared to 61 percent of non-metro clients. The lower positive response rate for non-metro respondents is likely related to the higher portion of older respondents in the non-metro area. More than half (59 percent) of the sample reported being a single parent.

Most respondents reported low household incomes, although one respondent reported income of more than \$35,000 a year (table 5). This individual was participating in a substance-abuse rehabilitation program, which required use of a food pantry as part of the rehabilitation process. The solid majority of respondents, however, earn less than \$15,000 a year.

The education levels of respondents are low. Roughly 45 percent of the non-metro pantry clients had not completed high school, compared with approximately 40 percent of the metro-area clients. But a number of respondents reported having some college education or even a college B.A. or B.S degree. Over 20 percent of the metro pantry users fit these two categories. Because of the location of a university and a junior college in this area, it is likely that this figure is somewhat higher than it would be in many other areas of the state.

Church attendance was high among food pantry clients, with 70 percent of respondents attending church once a week or more. Only eight percent of respondents report never attending church, and 18 percent attend a few times a year.

Compared to the national sample from America's Second Harvest, conducted at around the same time, the EAFB respondents had similar rates of employment for wages and a somewhat higher level of reported disabilities. The proportion of single parents was much higher in our sample than in the national group.

Food Hardship

Responses related to food hardship are reported in tables 6. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents indicated they do not always have enough money to buy food. Metro-area food-pantry users had the highest positive response to this question, with 45 percent indicating that they often ran out of money to purchase food and an additional 40 percent indicating that they sometimes ran out of money to purchase food. Among non-metro food-pantry users, 24 percent indicated they often ran out of money for food and an additional 49 percent indicated that they sometimes had this problem. The differences in responses to this question were significant at the 10 percent level, indicating that

metro-area clients are significantly more likely to run out of money to buy food.

Around 20 percent of both rural and urban food pantry users indicated that at least once in the last year adults in their household had gone a whole day without eating because they did not have enough food. No respondents reported that their children had gone a whole day without eating; however, two respondents did indicate that children had skipped meals because they did not have the money to buy food.

Trade-offs between buying food and paying other bills were fairly common among respondents (table 7). About half reported needing to make a choice between paying utilities and buying food, with rural clients being more likely to face this decision, although the difference is not statistically different. Trade-offs between paying the mortgage and buying food were somewhat less common, although over a third of the respondents had faced this dilemma.

Government Programs

In table 8, we report the use of government anti-poverty programs by our respondents. Thirty percent of metro-area respondents (14 individuals) and 39 percent of non-metro-area respondents (19 individuals) reported receiving food stamps. We asked a number of follow-up questions regarding food stamps. Summaries of these responses are not reported in the table, but full information is available on request. Of those that do receive food stamps, many are long-term recipients. Eleven of the 19 non-metro-area food stamp recipients have received food stamps for longer than two years, as have eight of the metro-area food stamp recipients.

In 1999, the maximum food stamp benefit was \$125 for a family of 1, \$230 for a family of 2, \$329 for a family of 3, \$419 for a family of 4, \$497 for a family of 5, and \$597 for a family of 6. About half the food-stamp recipients report receiving \$100 per month or less in food stamps. A small number (6 respondents) report receiving more than \$300 per month in food stamps. Of these, 3 reported living in very large households. One of the respondents reported benefits that were over the maximum allowed for the family size. It is possible that this respondent misunderstood the question, or that our enumerator recorded the answer incorrectly. Of those who did receive food stamps, a majority reported that the stamps did not last all month. A number of respondents (11 metro area and 6 non-metro area) reported having their benefits reduced in the last year and others expect reductions in the next year.

Five metro and 6 non-metro respondents not currently receiving food stamps had received them in the past year, but had them stopped. No respondent reported having benefits stopped because of work requirements or immigration status. A total of four respondents had their stamps stopped because their income became too high for them to be eligible. One respondent chose to stop receiving them. The rest either reported other reasons or did not provide a reason for being dropped from the food stamp rolls.

A number of those who did not receive food stamps had applied for them. Seventeen metro-area pantry users who reported not receiving food stamps had applied for them, and roughly half of that group was still waiting to hear about their applications at the time of our survey, while the other half had been rejected. By comparison, only 4 of the non-metro pantry users not currently receiving food stamps had applied for food stamps. Of those, one had been rejected, and two were waiting for approval. (The fourth did not provide us the information on the status of the application.)

Reasons why respondents did not apply for food stamps were also asked, although no clear pattern emerged and many people did not provide a response to this question. Some respondents reported that they either did not want to apply or it was not worth the trouble. These responses were somewhat more common in the non-metro area than in the metro area.

Participation in other programs is also reported in table 8. TANF use among respondents was low. Only four individuals reported receiving cash welfare payments. Given the historically low benefits paid in Alabama, this result is not surprising. About 40 percent of all respondents report having children who receive low-cost meals. (Among respondents with children under age 17 living at home, the figure is 62 percent.)

About 20 percent of the sample reported receiving food through the WIC program. Over fifty percent of non-metro respondents, but only 34 percent of metro families received SSI. The difference is linked to the age levels and disabilities of respondents. SSI provides income to poor families with either elderly or disabled members. Medicare use was also more prevalent among the non-metro residents' families. Medicaid, by contrast, was more likely to be used by the metro-area pantry clients. No statistically different use of government programs, other than SSI, was found between groups of respondents, however.

Food Pantry Experiences

Food bank users were asked questions about their experiences with the pantry services. Their responses are summarized in tables 9 and 10. About half the respondents report that they can get food at the pantry either weekly or monthly. Most, however, report using the pantry only "every now and then," although a third of the respondents report using the pantry at least once a month. About a quarter of the respondents reported using more than one pantry in the last year.

Duration of pantry use was markedly different between the metro-area sample and the non-metro area. The non-metro area reported a higher percentage of long-term (more than a year) users, 61 percent compared to only 28 percent in the metro area. The longer duration of pantry use for non-metro users was statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Over half the respondents believed they would still need the pantry in three months time. Hence, many of the pantry users, especially in the non-metro areas, are using the pantry as a long-term aid for managing their food problems.

Although not reported in this table, we also asked pantry users why they had come to the pantry. Reasons for use of the pantry varied, with health and unemployment reasons most frequently cited. The respondents in general had low education levels, many reported ill health or disabilities, and a sizable sub-sample in the non-metro area reported age over 60. Hence, many individuals using the pantry had little ability or opportunity to improve their economic circumstances through employment.

Overall, respondents reported a fairly high level of satisfaction with the food received at the pantries (table 10). Of non-metro respondents, 90 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of food and 85 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the quantity. Metro-area respondents had somewhat lower levels of satisfaction, with 76 percent satisfied or very satisfied with the quality and 75 percent satisfied with the quantity. The differences in responses to these questions were not statistically significant. We asked respondents to estimate how much food, in pounds, they received at a typical pantry visit, but we found that many pantry clients were unable to make a good estimate

by weight, referring instead to "getting a box," or some other measure. We also found that respondents frequenting the same pantry (and presumably getting the same amount of food) sometimes gave different estimates of the amount received in pounds.

We asked respondents about problems of access, although these responses are not reported in the tables. Transportation to the pantry site was a problem for 25 percent of the non-metro pantry users and 29 percent of the metro pantry users, although most of the people reporting a problem said it was "sometimes" rather than "always" a problem. Although not reported in the table, 56 percent of non-metro pantry users reported living more than five miles from the pantry site. Sixty-eight percent of metro pantry users, by contrast, reported living more than five miles from the site. These findings indicate that, contrary to our prior expectations, urban pantries are serving a broader geographic range than their more rural counterparts. Almost all respondents reported that staff members treat them with respect all of the time. Only one respondent (a non-metro pantry client) strongly agreed that she felt judged every time she went to the pantry. Most disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. The responses to this question were statistically different for metro versus non-metro responses. Metro users were more likely to report that they disagreed with this statement, rather than strongly disagreed.

The majority of metro-area pantry clients (71 percent) reported that if they could get as much food at a food pantry as they get with food stamps, they would still rather receive food stamps. When asked follow-up questions (not reported in the table), most said they preferred food stamps because of the choices in food available with food stamps. Non-metro area pantry clients were more likely to prefer food pantries over food stamps, with 51 percent preferring food pantries and 49 percent preferring food stamps.

Long-Term Clients

We performed a logit analyses to find the factors associated with long-term (more than one year) use of a food pantry. We hypothesized that low education, higher levels of food hardship, location (rural versus urban), and race could be significantly related to longer spells of pantry use.

Results of the model are reported in table 11. Race and rural location were the significant factors. Hence, in our area, long-term food pantry users tend to be rural, African-American women. (Almost all our clients are female, so gender was not included as an explanatory variable.) Clancy, Bowering, and Poppendieck (1991) also found that rural people were more likely to be long-term users of food pantries than their urban counterparts. In New York State, however, the rural long-term users were more likely to be white.

Conclusions

Our study shows that food pantries in the Deep South are diverse agencies in some respects, but that many directors have similar characteristics. Directors tend to be well educated and are proportionately more likely to be white than are their clients. While over 60 percent of directors are women, that figure jumps to around 90 percent for clients. Churches are highly involved in private emergency food assistance in the South. About 75 percent of the directors we surveyed reported that their pantry has an affiliation with a religious organization. The directors themselves are likely to attend church at least once a week.

Results from our study of the East Alabama area also shows much variability in the operating procedures, eligibility rules, and amount of food provided by food pantries. Metro-area agencies are more structured and have more defined operating guidelines than their more rural counterparts.

Rural pantry users indicated very high levels of satisfaction with food pantry services. They were more satisfied than metro-area users with the amount, quality, and variety of foods provided. The informal, personal nature of rural food pantries may contribute to the higher satisfaction levels of clients. The smaller, rural agencies may also provide more food, since they are serving fewer clients.

Concerns about stigma did not appear to bother food pantry clients in East Alabama. Clients overwhelmingly stated they are treated with respect "all of the time" by food pantry staff. Few felt as if they were being judged.

The clients we interviewed tended to be low-income women, with low education levels, and many of them were single mothers with children living at home. Another sub-set of clients tended to be older women, particularly in rural areas. Age, disability, and low job skills prevent a substantial number of the clients from having much hope for improved prospects in the future. Reliance on the pantry system appears to be a long-term prospect for such clients, particularly given the declining Federal support for the poor. The non-metro area clients, in particular, reported long-term (e.g. more than 2 years) use of the food pantry.

Overall, metro-area users were more likely to receive or apply for food stamps than their more rural counterparts. However, of those that do receive food stamps, non-metro area respondents were more likely than metro-area respondents to have received them for more than a year. The non-metro food pantry clients were also significantly more likely than metro-area clients to have used the food pantry for over a year. Poverty in the non-metro area of the study region may indicate a more long-term condition, than in the metro area, and appears linked to age, disabilities, and low education status.

Food pantries will probably remain an important source of assistance for the poor for many years to come. Hence, a policy issue of importance is whether more government resources, in the form of TEFAP commodities, should be devoted to these programs, so that they can increase their client base, if needed, or better serve their current clients. A possible negative consequence of increasing government support, however, is that more government involvement may detract from the flexible, informal nature of the pantries that is attractive to clients and directors of food pantries.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Pantry Directors, Alabama and Mississippi, 2002

Characteristic		pct	Number
Gender	Male	36	231
	Female	64	
Race	African American	37	215
	Caucasian	63	
Education	Less than HS	4	231
	HS Graduate	17	
	Some College/Tech	35	
	College Graduate	27	
	Graduate Degree	17	
Household Income	less than \$20,000	21	194
	\$20,000 to \$29,999	10	
	\$30,000 to \$39,999	17	
	\$40,000 to \$49,999	13	
	\$50,000 to \$59,999	11	
	\$60,000 to \$74,999	12	
	\$75,000 to \$99,999	10	
	\$100,000 or more	5	
Church Attendance	Never	2	231
	Occasionally	3	
	A few times a month	9	
	Once a week or more	86	

Table 2. Directors' Attitudes about Poverty, Alabama and Mississippi, 2002

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
	pct	pct	pct	pct	pct	pct
1 Poverty is caused by prejudice and discrimination against minority and individuals	3	12	14	42	25	4
2 Poverty is caused by the failure of society to provide good schools for many Americans	4	20	15	44	15	3
3 Poverty is caused by lack of ability and talent among poor people.	3	23	9	42	20	3
4 Poverty is caused by loose morals and drunkenness.	2	9	6	41	40	2
5 Generally speaking, we are spending too little money on welfare.	8	19	24	35	12	2

N=235

Table 3. Directors' Attitudes about Food Pantry Clients, Alabama and Mississippi, 2002

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
	pct	pct	pct	pct	pct	pct
1 There are too many people using food pantries that should be working.	12	21	17	37	12	2
2 Many people getting food are not honest about their needs.	12	37	18	28	3	3
3 Food pantry use is often caused by the sickness and physical handicaps of poor people.	9	43	11	29	6	2
4 People who use food pantries are just having bad luck.	0	18	17	45	16	4
5 Most people who use food pantries and who are able to work are trying to find jobs.	9	51	18	18	3	3
6 Food pantry use is caused by low wages in some businesses and industries.	12	55	12	15	2	5

N=235

Table 4. Characteristics of Study Respondents, East Alabama, 1999

Characteristic		Entire Sample	Non- Metro	Metro	Chi- Square
		pct	pct	pct	
Gender	Male	11	10	13	0.16
	Female	89	90	87	
Age	17-20	2	2	2	9.06
	21-25	11	12	9	
	26-29	5	4	6	
	30-39	27	31	24	
	40-49	26	21	32	
	50-59	12	6	17	
	60-69	9	10	8	
	70+	8	14	2	
Household Size	One Person	17	18	15	4.23
	2 to 3	36	35	38	
	4 to 6	40	35	45	
	7 or more	7	12	2	
Employment Status	Employed	28	29	28	2.83
	Disabled	35	32	38	
	Retired	8	10	6	
	Student	2	2	2	
	Homemaker	13	17	9	
	Unemployed	13	10	17	
Wage-earning employment	Full-time	19	22	15	2.89*
	Part-time	10	6	14	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

* Significant at 10% level

Table 5. Family Status, Race, Education, and Income of Respondents, East Alabama, 1999

Item		Entire Sample	Non-Metro	Metro	Chi-square
Single Parent	Yes	pct 59	pct 57	pct 61	0.08
Children under 17 living in household	Yes	66	61	72	1.17
Race	African American	61	55	68	3.10
	Caucasian	37	41	32	
	Other	2	4	0	
Household Income	Under \$5,000 yr.	19	16	23	4.61
	\$5,000 - \$9,999	33	33	34	
	\$10,000 - \$14,999	19	25	13	
	\$15,000 - \$19,999	14	14	13	
	\$20,000 - \$24,999	9	8	11	
	\$25,000 - \$29,999	3	4	2	
	\$30,000 - \$34,999	1	0	2	
	\$35,000 or more	1	0	2	
Education Level	Some grade school	6	8	4	2.82
	Grade school	3	2	4	
	Some high school	34	35	32	
	High school or GED	30	27	34	
	Business/Trade school	7	10	4	
	Some college	12	12	13	
	College B.A. or B.S.	7	6	9	
Church Attendance	More than once a week	46	45	47	5.06
	About once a week	24	16	32	
	Two or three times a	4	6	2	
	A few times a year or	18	23	13	
	Not at all	8	10	6	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

Table 6. Food Hardship among East Alabama Food Pantry Clients, 1999

Item		Entire	Non-metro	Metro	Chi-square
		Sample	pct.	pct.	
I worried whether food would run out before I got money to buy more.	Never true	31	39	22	3.25
	Sometimes true	58	51	65	
	Often true	11	10	13	
Do you ever run out of money to purchase food?	Never	21	27	15	4.80*
	Sometimes	45	49	40	
	Often	34	24	45	
Do you have enough of the kinds of food you want to eat?	Yes	25	33	17	4.57
	Yes, but not always the kinds we want	55	53	58	
	enough	14	8	19	
	Often not enough	6	6	6	
In the last 12 months:					
Did you ever go to someone's home for a meal because you were out of food?	Never	63	69	57	1.65
	Sometimes	31	25	37	
	Often	6	6	6	
Did you ever send your child to someone's home for a meal because you were out of food?	Never	80	84	76	4.23
	Sometimes	17	10	24	
	Often	3	6	0	
Did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	Never	54	55	53	1.87
	Sometimes	33	37	30	
	Often	13	8	17	
Did you not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	Never	80	80	81	2.06
	Sometimes	15	12	17	
	Often	5	8	2	
Did you ever cut the size of the children's meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	Never	89	87	91	0.24
	Sometimes	11	13	9	
Did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn't enough money for food?	Never	98	96	100	1.16
	Sometimes	2	4	0	
Did your child/children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?	Never	100	100	100	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

* Significant at 10% level

Table 7. Trade-offs among Hardships, East Alabama Food Pantry Clients, 1999

Item		Entire Sample	Non-metro	Metro	Chi-square
		pct	pct	pct	
Within the past 12 months have you had to choose between paying rent or mortgage and buying food?	Never	62	63	61	0.83
	Sometimes	32	29	35	
	Often	6	8	4	
Within the past 12 months, have you had to choose between paying for utilities and buying food?	Never	51	46	57	3.89
	Sometimes	38	37	39	
	Often	11	17	4	
Within the past 12 months, have you had to choose between paying for medicine and buying food?	Never	71	78	63	2.75
	Sometimes	23	16	31	
	Often	6	6	6	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

Table 8. Participation in Government Safety Net Programs, East Alabama Food Pantry Clients, 1999

Item	Entire Sample	Non-metro	Metro	Chi-square
	pct	pct	pct	
Food Stamps	35	39	30	0.86
TANF	4	4	4	0.00
Free or reduced-cost meals for the elderly	6	6	6	0.00
Reduced-cost meals at school	41	40	43	0.09
Free or reduced-cost food at a day care or Head Start program	8	8	8	0.00
Food through the WIC program	20	23	17	0.52
SSI benefits	43	52	34	3.15*
Medicare	32	39	25	1.92
Medicaid	47	39	55	2.64
Number	(96)	(49)	(47)	

* Significant at 10% level

Table 9. Food Pantry Use, Frequency and Duration, East Alabama, 1999

Item		Entire Sample	Non-metro	Metro	Chi-square
		pct	pct	pct	
How often can you receive food at the pantry?	Weekly	19	32	7	16.42**
	Monthly	33	14	51	
	Less Often	16	19	12	
	Not told	19	24	15	
	Other	13	11	15	
How often do you get food from the food pantry?	Once a week	9	10	7	0.52
	Once a month	27	25	29	
	Every now and then	64	65	64	
How long have you been receiving food (or food assistance) from this food pantry?	Less than 1 month	7	4	11	11.13**
	1-3 months	16	10	21	
	4-6 months	12	10	13	
	7-9 months	4	2	6	
	10-12 months	17	13	21	
	More than 12 months	44	61	28	
Do you think you will have to come to this pantry to get food three months from now?	Yes	57	53	61	0.57
	I hope not	23	26	20	
	No	20	21	19	
Have you received food from more than one food pantry in the last 12 months?	Yes	27	26	28	0.02
	No	73	74	72	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

** Significant at the 5% level

Table 10. Satisfaction with Food Pantry, East Alabama, 1999

Item		Entire Sample	Non-metro	Metro	Chi-square
		pct	pct	pct	
How satisfied are you with the quality of food provided by the food pantry?	Very satisfied	48	52	44	3.91
	Satisfied	35	38	32	
	Somewhat satisfied	14	8	20	
	Dissatisfied	2	2	2	
	Very dissatisfied	1	0	2	
How satisfied are you with the amount of food provided by the food pantry?	Very satisfied	40	40	40	2.98
	Satisfied	40	45	35	
	Somewhat satisfied	15	13	17	
	Dissatisfied	4	2	6	
	Very dissatisfied	1	0	2	
How satisfied are you with the variety of food that is available to you?	Very satisfied	36	42	29	6.24
	Satisfied	43	47	40	
	Somewhat satisfied	19	11	27	
	Dissatisfied	1	0	2	
	Very dissatisfied	1	0	2	
Is it hard for you to find transportation to get to the site?	Sometimes	22	21	24	0.63
	Always	5	4	6	
	Other	3	4	2	
	Never	70	71	68	
When you come to the pantry, are you treated with respect?	Some of the time	1	2	0	0.97
	Most of the time	4	4	4	
	All of the time	95	94	96	
I feel like I am being judged because of my situation every time I go to the food pantry.	Strongly agree	1	2	0	10.16*
	Agree	5	2	9	
	Undecided	6	6	6	
	Disagree	54	43	63	
	Strongly disagree	34	47	22	
If you could get as much food at a food pantry as you get with food stamps, would you prefer to use the food pantry?	Food Stamps	59	49	71	3.65*
	Food Pantry	41	51	29	
Number		(96)	(49)	(47)	

* Significant at the 10% level

Table 11. Logit Model Results, Determinants of Long Time Use of Food Pantry

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	Marginal Effect	Standard error
Constant	-1.058	0.703	-0.258	0.169
Run out of food often	0.48	0.522	0.117	0.127
Dummy for low education (less than GED or high school diploma)	0.515	0.477	0.125	0.116
Family size	0.035	0.124	0.008	0.030
Rural	1.783**	0.518	0.435**	0.126
Single parent	-0.226	0.493	-0.055	0.120
Race-white	-1.539**	0.559	-0.376**	0.136

** significant at 1% level