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Private Food Assistance in a Small Metropolitan Area: Urban Resources and Rural Needs

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Food banks and other private feeding programs have become an institutionalized component of the social welfare system in over 190 urban areas in the U.S. More recently, private food assistance has gained importance in rural areas as well. The density and capacity of agencies to serve the poor is higher in urban areas than in sparsely populated rural locales where distance and dispersal tend to be barriers to supplying and accessing donated food. Rural food distribution strategies thus must be qualitatively different than those in larger communities, because of the smaller-scale, more informal distributional system. Little is known about how urban-based nonprofit services stimulate and support food assistance in surrounding rural locales. Based on intensive interviews with food bank staff, food pantry directors, and food pantry clientele, we examine obstacles affecting the use of food pantries and the amelioration of food insecurity. We also provide an assessment of how changes in federal welfare provisions may be affecting the need for private food assistance.

Over the last two decades, the network of food banks serving urban locales has increased dramatically in the United States. Before the 1980's, private food aid in this country was largely limited to soup kitchens in urban areas. Now over 190 urban-based private emergency food systems are expanding to offer a wider variety of food assistance. These systems were originally promoted as a response to a short-term crisis (Curtis & McClellan, 1995), but food drives and other forms of private food aid by local community groups have become a lasting and common feature of urban life (Clancy et al., 1991). Despite a growing economy and

low unemployment rates during the 1990s, the need for private aid has increased sharply (Nelson et al., 1998; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1998). America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest private hunger relief agency, estimates that in 1997, nearly 26 million people, over one-third of whom were children, received food and groceries through the America's Second Harvest network of food distribution centers. This growing reliance on private food assistance makes it increasingly important to understand how urban food banks meet the needs of the low-income individuals and families who have been affected by major changes in social welfare policies (Clancy et al., 1991; Curtis, 1997; Kirk & Rittner, 1993).

The density and capacity of agencies serving the urban poor is higher than in sparsely populated rural locales where distance and dispersal tend to be barriers to supplying and accessing donated food. Rural food distribution strategies thus must be qualitatively different than those in larger communities, because of the smaller-scale and informal organizational capacity of the distributional system. Little is known about differences in the way urban-based nonprofit services are made available in surrounding rural locales (Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999).

Our study focuses on the East Alabama Food Bank (EAFB), which is affiliated with the America's Second Harvest (ASH) system of food banks. Located in one of the twin cities of a recently named metropolitan area, it serves an urbanized center with a surrounding set of six largely rural, poor counties. Through site visits, and intensive interviews with directors, clients, and food bank staff, we present a case study of this agency and 12 of its constituent food pantries. We compare differences in eligibility requirements and operational procedures for the six rural and six urban locations. We also examine differences in rural and urban pantry directors' perceptions of how welfare reform is affecting their clients.

Critical Views of Food Banking

Some neo-conservative criticisms of government assistance to the poor have emphasized that government bureaucracies—particularly those responsible for welfare and child-protection—

are rule-laden, cumbersome institutions that smother society in red tape and deny essential aid to the poor (Olasky, 1992). For those who view government assistance as cumbersome and ineffective, food banks may appear to be the best solution to the hunger problem. They are private, voluntary organizations that are community based and therefore presumably community responsive. Nonetheless, food banks and pantries have critics.

Karla 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. Some view food banks as 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. In short, critics argue that food banks do a good job of covering up the poverty crisis (Webber, 1992).

Because food banks were originally modeled as a short-term 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. 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). 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.

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 foodstuffs 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.

Other criticisms include the increased bureaucracy that has emerged with the success of food banking. Curtis (1997) concluded that the increases in the size of food pantries, and in the number of people served, have created more social distance between volunteers and clients. Discussing food assistance programs in Wilmington, Delaware, Curtis (1997) commented that the recent adoption of "eligibility standards" in some food pantries, driven by a large increase in demand, has made the system less friendly to clients and more like the bureaucracies of the welfare programs. Soup kitchens and pantries all had "literal and figurative boundaries between the recipients and the food." In language reminiscent of Batteau's (1983) comments on Food Stamp distribution in Appalachia, Curtis reported observing, "recipients of emergency bags from a church in southern Delaware waiting in line at the side door in the pouring rain."

Poppendiek's (1998) seven-year study of emergency food programs came to similar conclusions, i.e., 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. Poppendiek thus believes that clients are often humiliated when denied assistance by a suspicious director.

Food Insecurity in Rural and Urban Areas

The question of the appropriate role of food banks may depend partly on context. The different needs for food services among rural and urban residents has received very little attention even though evidence exists that the rural poor face different problems than their urban counterparts (Davis, 1994; Sherman,

1992). If, in fact, the residents of these different areas do have distinct needs and problems, food assistance providers must be aware of them to be effective at alleviating hunger and food insecurity in their communities. Because of the recent federal policy changes affecting eligibility for government programs, a better understanding of client needs is especially crucial at this time.

Food insecurity is defined as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (USDA, 1999). Food insecurity ranges in severity. It may be unaccompanied by hunger, accompanied by moderate hunger or accompanied by severe hunger. Andrews and Bickel (1998) developed a measure of hunger and food insecurity in the United States that is often used to estimate the proportion of food insecure American households. A recent USDA survey used this measure to reveal that from 1996 to 1998, 10 million (9.7 percent of total) households experienced food insecurity. Among this group, 3.5 percent experienced a level of food security severe enough to be hungry at least some time during the year. The state-level data showed that the level of food insecurity in Alabama was 11.3 percent, which was not significantly above the national average of 9.7 percent. The hunger rate in Alabama was 3.2 percent of households, slightly below the national average of 3.5 percent.

In the USDA study, food insecurity in rural areas was found to be a bigger problem than in suburbs and metropolitan areas outside central cities. Since 10.6 percent of rural households were food insecure, it is important to ensure adequate support structures for this population in need. Further, Shotland & Loonin's (1998) review suggests that impoverished rural residents experience more nutritional problems than higher-income individuals and, often, more problems than the urban poor. Sources of vitamins A and C for the rural poor are especially inadequate. The disproportionate effect of poverty on the nutritional intake was greatest among children, especially the youngest group (2–5 years). Nutritional inadequacy was also greater among females than males.

Rose et al. (1998) report national data showing that households with higher incomes, homeowners, households headed

by a high school graduate, and elderly households were less likely to be food insufficient. Holding other factors constant, those living below the poverty line were over 3.5 times more likely to be food insufficient. However, no one-to-one correspondence existed between official poverty levels and food insufficiency, since just over 60 percent of food-insufficient households were below the poverty line and only about 10 percent of households below the poverty line were food insufficient. Many food insecure households that are above the poverty line are only slightly above it (Daponte et al., 1998). Some of these households may experience food insecurity because of high housing costs in the local market, unusual medical expenses, or temporary unemployment. Food stamp benefit levels were inversely associated with food insufficiency. Asset limits for food stamps may keep people experiencing temporary job loss or other short-term problems from qualifying.

Several previous studies have examined the needs and characteristics of users of both private and state food assistance programs. Few studies, however, have examined the different needs of rural and urban food assistance recipients. Instead, most studies have examined one population of clients. Research on food insecurity in a particular population may involve surveying only emergency food service clientele or may sample low-income families in general. Taren et al. (1990) used the second strategy, interviewing low-income families in Hillsborough County, Florida, to determine factors related to food consumption. Roughly half of 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.

A study of emergency food system clientele compared 400 food pantry users and low-income non-users in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (Daponte et al., 1998). All respondents were below 185 percent of the poverty level. Results showed 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. The median length of food pantry use was two years. Thus, these food pantries were serving more chronic cases as opposed to the emergency cases they were created to serve.

Kirk and Rittner (1993) surveyed 1,083 elderly daytime meal program recipients in a South Florida community. Average

monthly income for participants in this emergency food service program was \$443 per month, with a range of \$242 to \$710. Although most of the respondents would have been eligible for food stamps, only 18 percent received them. Over half of those surveyed said they did not participate because they did not want to be identified as welfare recipients. A smaller percentage (14.3%) indicated that they did not apply for food stamps because they did not know how. The under use of food stamps by the elderly poor largely is consistent with Coe's (1983) findings that lack of information rather than fear of stigma was the major barrier to application.

One study addressed separate rural and urban population issues by interviewing private food assistance clients in Upstate New York and clients in New York City (Clancy et al., 1991). The Upstate sample was disproportionately composed of white women with children. In contrast, the New York City sample had a larger percentage of older blacks, without children at home. The Upstate sample also had more long-term users (more than 3 years) than the city group.

Rural areas have special characteristics that can make poverty more tenacious there. Further, delivery of services to the low-income rural population can be more difficult than in urban areas. Children may be especially affected. The Children's Defense Fund (Sherman, 1992) finds that rural children are somewhat more likely to be poor than American children overall, and poverty rates for rural children (as for all children) have trended upward in the last two decades. Compared to metro-area schools, rural schools generally have lower expenditures per student, less experienced teachers, higher teacher turnover, and a more limited range of class offerings. For adults, rural pay is lower in every field, averaging about 75 percent of non-rural pay, and rural people are disproportionately represented in very low-income jobs. Displaced rural workers suffer longer periods of joblessness than non-rural workers, and new jobs (if found) tend to yield a steeper pay cut than for non-rural workers. The longer joblessness periods of the rural poor could account for the tendency for the Upstate New York poor to use the food pantries for longer periods of time than did their New York City counterparts (Clancy et al. 1991).

Childcare also tends to be difficult to find in rural areas, which can exacerbate the problems faced by rural welfare recipients who must be counted as "working" within two years of entering the welfare system. Rural childcare choices are limited, quality may be low, and the facilities may be inconveniently located (Davis, 1994).

Transportation in general can also be a problem in rural areas (Quandt & Rao, 1999). To qualify for food stamps, a family cannot have more than \$2,000 in assets, including the value of a car beyond a set-aside of \$4,550. Such a low-cost vehicle might not be reliable transportation. The transportation problem would affect not only the individual's ability to drive to work, but could also create problems accessing the local food pantry. Household ownership of two cars, which might be necessary in some rural households with two adult wage-earners, almost always disqualifies an applicant from receiving food stamps.

In a logistic regression that also considered household structure, age, education, race, and car ownership was the sole significant factor affecting food pantry use among those surveyed by Daponte et al. (1998). Those who owned a car were less likely to use a pantry than those who did not. Since car ownership was the only significant variable, the authors concluded that only the poorest of the poor do not own a car, and, thus, these households are most likely to depend on a food pantry. Most of the pantry users accessed the pantries by walking and only 26 percent of users owned a car.

Daponte et al. (1998) showed that lack of a car is a good indicator of need for food pantry services. Similarly, a 1997 survey found that 60 percent of their clients were without a car (America's Second Harvest, 1998). These findings highlight the importance of examining access to a pantry. In the rural South, for example, most people do not live within walking distance of a food pantry. Transportation to the pantry site thus becomes a question of interest. In rural areas, where services are widely dispersed and public transportation is often non-existent, clients who are in need of food may not be able to access the pantries if they do not have a personal vehicle. Limited job opportunity, poor childcare choices, and transportation problems could be especially troublesome to

the population of rural people attempting to leave federal welfare programs.

Perceptions of stigma from using either state welfare programs or private food assistance may be stronger among the rural population. Feelings of shame mark many program transactions designed to assist the low-income population (Batteau, 1993). Stein (1989) observed that welfare distribution systems sometimes appear designed to publicly humiliate recipients and to underscore their dependence on those who have power to provide or withhold access. Among residents of rural areas, where a high value is often placed on independence, admitting the need for food assistance may be especially difficult.

Rural areas having high rates of poverty generally are not served by the institutional structure found in many urban areas. Consequently, the number and financial strength of agencies capable of addressing hunger and other poverty needs of a rural population often do not correspond to the requirements of the situation. In the case of food banks, the opportunity to assist the rural hungry often falls on newer, smaller food banks located in towns and small cities surrounded by large rural areas with weak infrastructures for delivering food assistance.

Policy Issues

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) significantly changed federal welfare policy for low-income families with children, building upon and expanding state-level reforms. Among the major changes contained in the Act were limits in eligibility for the Supplemental Security Income and Food Stamp Programs (USGAO, 1999a; b; c). It also ended the federal entitlement to cash assistance for eligible needy families with children under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. TANF is designed to help low-income families reduce their dependence on welfare and move toward economic independence (USGAO, 1998).

Under TANF, states have much greater flexibility than was the case under the old AFDC program. At the same time, states must impose federal work and other program requirements on most

adults receiving aid and enforce a lifetime limit of five years (or less at state option) of federal assistance (Kramer-LeBlanc et al., 1997). These recent federal and state reforms represent significant departures from previous policies for helping needy families with children.

A Tufts University (1998) study evaluated the likely effects that changes in each state's welfare programs would have on the circumstances of the poor. Only 14 states were rated as demonstrating greater investment in the economic security of poor families, two states maintained the status quo, and 34 states and the District of Columbia enacted policies deemed likely to worsen the economic security of poor families. In the Tufts study, Alabama ranked 45th among states and the District of Columbia, meaning that its policy changes will likely be detrimental to the economic security of the poor.

Indeed, Dawson (1997) finds that some very poor Alabama families may no longer be served at all. A regression analysis of the recent caseload reduction indicates that while much of the recent drop in the Alabama welfare rolls can be accounted for by low statewide unemployment, an even higher amount of the decrease results from a reduction in intake percentages. Before welfare reform, approximately 63 percent of applicants were approved for welfare. Currently, the acceptance rate from first contact is 46 percent. It is not known whether the refused applicants are finding employment or are discouraged by the new job search requirements from pursuing further steps in the application process. If the latter, this population could be at risk for extreme food insecurity.

Because of low cash welfare benefit levels, even those who are accepted onto the welfare rolls in Alabama could very well continue to be at high risk for food insecurity. In Alabama, benefits for an adult and two children are \$164 a month. Such a household would have a typical allotment of \$335 in food stamps. To feed a family of three entirely with food stamps would require excellent planning and meal preparation skills. If cooking or refrigeration facilities were limited in a household, food stamps would not last for the month, even with the most careful planning.

If the current economic boom were to end and unemployment rates were to increase, then caseloads would likely grow and

demands on state welfare budgets would increase. At the same time, the TANF block grant would remain at its specified level. A prolonged recession could lead to serious disruptions in state welfare programs and high levels of unmet need—i.e. hungry people.

There is mounting evidence that food stamp cuts have already caused real hardship. Among patients admitted to an urban county hospital during a two-week period, 14 percent reported going hungry but not eating because they could not afford food (Nelson et al., 1998). Nearly five percent of the total sample had previously been eligible for food stamps, but had their benefits reduced or eliminated. These individuals were more likely than others to report they did not have enough food. A separate survey of patients who received insulin from the hospital pharmacy showed that inability to afford food contributed to hypoglycemic reaction problems.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors documented a 16 percent increase in demand for private food assistance in 1997. A study of Latino and Asian legal immigrants in 13 hospitals and community-based clinics in California, Texas, and Illinois, showed that, due largely to food stamp cuts, legal immigrant families suffered seven times the rates of hunger as the general population (Food Research and Action Center, 1998).

Public perception of the generosity of the Food Stamp Program is often based on incomplete information. For example, many people may know that the income ceiling for food stamp eligibility for a single person is \$1,085 a month, which seems like a generous income allowance. In reality, however, benefits depend not only on income level, but also on certain allowable expenses. Because expenses for medical care and housing figure into the benefit calculation, an elderly or disabled householder, who owns his or her home without mortgage, and whose sole source of income is Supplemental Security Income (monthly cash benefit of \$494) would probably receive only \$14 per month in food stamps. Such individuals would also likely be at risk for food insecurity.

Food Bank of East Alabama

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 America's Second Harvest (ASH),¹ a network of over 200 regional food distribution organizations that serve all 50 states and Puerto Rico, and distributes more than one billion pounds of donated food and grocery products annually. Historically, such foods were wasted until food banks became assembly points to receive salvageable and surplus foods for subsequent distribution through a network of member agencies. ASH also organizes the tax write-offs, record keeping, and receipt of surplus food from food manufacturers and distributors.

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 food distribution or feeding program that serves the needy, ill or infants; and it must have a 501(c) 3 letter from the IRS. Agencies make application to affiliate with EAFB and 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.

EAFB serves more than 120 agencies in a six county area with a current average disbursement of nearly 200,000 pounds each month. Four counties are officially recognized by ASH as the territory served by the EAFB. Nonetheless, because of proximity, agency preference, or accident of circumstance some agencies in other adjacent counties are affiliated with EAFB. The five surrounding counties in its service area are some of the poorest in Alabama. One county 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 the county where the EAFB is located has two neighboring cities with combined populations of over 50 thousand people, and with over 102 thousand estimated for the county as a whole, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of People and Children in Poverty, East Alabama Food Bank Service Area Counties, 1995

Statistic	EAFB Service Area Counties					
	Lee	Macon	Tallapoosa	Chambers	Russell	Bullock
People of all ages in poverty	16,457 (17.3) ¹	7,529 (32.0)	6,985 (17.5)	6,828 (18.6)	10,089 (19.6)	3,524 (31.5)
People under age 18 in poverty	4,702 (4.9)	2,858 (12.1)	2,558 (6.4)	2,621 (7.1)	3,949 (7.7)	1,448 (12.9)
Related children ages 5–17 in families in poverty	2,987 (3.1)	1,904 (8.1)	1,662 (4.2)	1,680 (4.6)	2,557 (5.0)	966 (8.6)
Total population (1999)	102,164	22,993	40,329	36,369	50,071	11,343

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

¹Percent of population in poverty.

EAFB member agencies are found in surrounding rural counties with the greatest concentration of member agencies (over 30) in the central city county (Lee). The local ministerial alliance has been a source of outreach to the vulnerable population, informing those in need of agency services. The older population, especially, is connected with churches, making this source of information important to them. Of the food distributed by the EAFB, 40 percent comes from America's Second Harvest, 10 percent is from local donations, and the remainder comes from donations to the Montgomery Food Bank.

Five of the EAFB counties have rates of unemployment below the national average of 4.1 percent. By contrast, two had 6 percent unemployment or more (ADECA, 1998). Poverty rates also cover a wide range, as shown in Table 1. Poverty rates in 1995 were estimated at 17–20 percent in four counties, and over 30 percent in two others (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). The same two have over 70 percent non-white population, Russell around 39 percent, while the others have around 25 percent minority population.

Of the approximately 120 EAFB agencies, more than 24 are located in Lee, the urban county. The others are dispersed across

the rural portion of Lee and five other counties. The majority of these agencies are food pantries (sometimes called food closets), which provide food that clients prepare at home. Several on-site feeding facilities, group homes, and shelters also are EAFB affiliate agencies, but this study focuses on food pantries as food distribution outlets.

Methods

A sample of six rural and six urban pantry locations were selected using probability in proportion to size methods. Information was then gathered, over the Spring and Summer of 1999, by interviewing pantry supervisors, pantry clients, and food-needy individuals who did not use the pantry services.

As the first step, we conducted semi-structured interviews with pantry supervisors to assess the nature of problems and issues associated with the process of rendering food assistance to their client base. We also sought to discover, via open-ended questions, any obstacles the agency representatives believe might be preventing needy individuals in the community from receiving aid. Supervisors were also asked to comment on how the 1996 welfare reform program is affecting their pantry clients.

Findings

The Central Role of Rural Churches

A major finding of this study is the important social welfare function of the rural church and how the food bank program is expanding this role. ASH (2001) reports that around 50 percent of its total food pantries and food banks are affiliated with churches, and this is particularly prevalent in rural Alabama. Rural ministers and their churches play an important role in identifying hunger as a congregational issue, seeking affiliation with the EAFB, and organizing the outreach effort. In particular, food distribution has provided a focal role for black congregations to provide assistance to their memberships and communities. In many cases, the formal tie to the EAFB is the first and only non-church contact or relationship initiated by many of these rural congregations.

Food banking 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 regularized 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 for identifying and helping those in need.

Rural Food Banks: Diverse and Informal

Another major finding of the study pertains to the high degree of variability that exists across the pantries or local agencies that distribute food. When we began our research, we assumed that the food bank system operated in a somewhat bureaucratic fashion, with a clear division of labor and with certain procedures and methods carried out by all actors in the network. Instead, we found a highly diverse and flexible, but also at times personalistic, system.

Although ASH 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 in both urban and rural food pantries. Urban agencies tend to be more structured and have more defined guidelines about eligibility requirements, the amount of food a person can receive, and the number of times a person can receive food. One urban EAFB agency is a branch office of a large national social welfare organization. Personnel largely from outside the community staff it. When individuals approach the agency for food, the potential recipient is asked to go to the county office of the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) for a referral slip.

The DHR office is nearly two miles distance and the visit requires some time to complete lengthy paperwork and interview. The client can then return to the agency and obtain a bag or two of food, depending on family size and need as certified by DHR. Informally, agency personnel were observed to relax these procedures when impending closing hours of DHR and the agency put the client in a difficult situation. However, not all urban pantries are operated with such strict rules. This agency

is probably the most bureaucratic of all the sites and does not represent the structure of all urban sites. Nevertheless, the urban agencies were more structured than the rural agencies overall, but all varied in the level of formality.

Although regular monitoring takes place, the character of rural food pantries tends to be highly individualized, reflecting the context, the personality of the organizer, and the clientele being served. The rural agency directors do not worry as much about documenting whether the clients meet certain eligibility requirements, because they know the situations of the people that come to them. Several of the rural directors mentioned that they know most of the people in the area and tend to know who is in need. Others get to know the people who come to them for assistance. One rural director said, "I pretty well know when they're in need; I'm on a level with them. They talk to me. I pretty well know what they make every month. I get to know them on a one-on-one basis."

Some rural pantry directors deliver food to those who can't drive or don't have transportation. Every rural agency had delivered food at some point, compared to only one urban agency. Some rural directors even take food to those who they know are in need but will not ask for assistance. The urban directors did not report this type of personal assistance.

The perceived rural-urban differences in formality of operation may in fact be caused largely by size differences. Smaller organizations, which are more likely to be found in rural areas, foster more informal and personal relationships. Rural pantries tend to be operated by smaller agencies and to serve fewer clients. Consequently, relationships with rural food pantry clients would be expected to be more informal and personal.

Client Experiences

A third important finding of our study is that the experiences of EAFB clients and agencies do not seem to resonate with many of the themes or issues raised by critics of food banking. In contrast to the Winnipeg food bank practice of providing food from a central location, the ASH model uses a decentralized network of food pantries to accomplish food distribution. The decentralized

distribution mechanism may counter many of the problems with lines, stigma, and alienation expressed in conjunction with the Winnipeg situation.

The food pantries in the EAFB case study did not appear to create dependency among their users as previous studies have shown. The agencies in this study are not designed to be the only source of food for their clients. Instead, they are a supplement to the food a client already has and often help during emergency situations such as job loss, divorce, illness, or other special circumstances. The agencies do not serve the same clients "year after year after year" as one of Hilton's informants suggested. Small, rural churches that operate food pantries do not have the funds to operate in such a manner. The clients understand that the resources are limited, and that the local food pantry does not provide a consistent source of food such as one would get with food stamps or other government programs. One of the rural pantry directors said, "Our users are working people trying to help themselves." By helping them with food, this director believes he is getting them in the position to be self-sufficient. He specifically mentioned that he does not want to "breed laziness."

Many of the rural clients are elderly people who are pressed to use the food pantry because of high costs of prescription medicine. They are not trying to be dependent on a system but have reached a point in their lives when some extra help is essential.

The second criticism of food banks, the demeaning attitude of food pantry staff towards clients, was also not evident in our interviews with the agency directors and clients. Almost all of the clients in rural and urban locations stated that they are treated with respect all of the time by food pantry staff.

While interviewing and interacting with clients at the sites, we observed that many directors have good relationships with their patrons. As stated earlier, the rural pantry directors were more personable with their clients than urban directors. Some of the urban agencies also had good client relationships, but they were more likely to have greater social distance between staff and clients. The urban agency that is a branch of a large, social welfare organization probably showed the greatest distance between clients and staff. The staff members at this agency were

separated from the clients by a glass window that was opened only when clients walked up to the counter.

Contrary to our expectations, transportation did not appear to be a large problem for either the urban or the rural pantry clients. Most clients had a means of getting to the pantry, or as mentioned previously, the pantry director would make deliveries for those in special need.

Consequences of Welfare Reform

Half of the urban site supervisors reported an increase in the number of people using the food pantry as a result of welfare reform. Only one of the six rural sites reported an increase in users because of food stamp reductions. Another rural site reported an increase in users, but the increase was not said to be a result of the 1996 Act. One of the rural pantry directors said he thought welfare reform was greatly needed, but did not think it has affected his clients in a negative way. Overall, the rural pantries did not seem to be as concerned about welfare reform.

Both urban and rural sites mentioned only the reductions in food stamps as affecting their clients. No directors reported reductions in TANF benefits as a reason for clients using the pantry. Only a small percentage of the clients were or had been TANF recipients, so that is one possible reason the directors are not seeing the effect of this reform. Furthermore, the five-year time limit on receipt of TANF benefits will not end until 2002 for clients receiving benefits since 1997. Therefore, the impact of the time limits will not be felt for several years.

Conclusions

Results from the case study show much variability in the operating procedures, eligibility rules, and amount of food provided by food pantries. Urban agencies are more structured and have more defined operating guidelines. Rural agencies tended to be linked to churches and provide smaller volumes of food to smaller groups of recipients, mainly church members and those known to church members. Urban agencies tended to be linked to larger churches and public and private agencies with more formalized food distribution processes that included referrals and other forms of interorganizational cooperation.

Food pantries cannot distribute enough food at sufficient frequency to be a sole or central source of sustenance for individuals or families. Our fieldwork suggests that food banks and the network of food pantries that distributes food to hungry people provide uneven and irregular food supplies to a population with low expectations for assistance. Nonetheless, food pantries remain an important source of help for the poor, particularly in times of acute need. We observed that clients tended to weave resources from food pantries into a broader coping strategy that featured food stamps, occasional work, family assistance, and other personal resources.

The private, nonprofit welfare systems continue to grow and elaborate in East Alabama. The EAFB is continuing to add agencies to its distribution network, and the individual pantries sustain their efforts to increase their client base and provide information to those who are unaware of the programs. If the trend toward "privatizing" anti-poverty programs continues, food pantries will probably remain an important source of assistance for many low-income people. An issue to resolve is how the pantries can reach those unaware of their services, and whether they can realistically increase their donations to cover all the food-needy people. One option might be to increase government funding for programs that provide assistance to food pantries. However, increased government involvement may detract from the flexible, informal nature of the pantries, especially if taxpayers begin to demand "accountability" from the food bank system. Further, expanding direct government assistance to faith-based organizations providing charitable services (as proposed by President Bush) could change the composition of providers.

In our study, smaller, rural churches were found to be effective food assistance providers because the EAFB kept the obstacles to participation low. More government support, and more government paperwork, could result in the balance of such aid going to larger, urban, and affluent congregations, which have the resources to put together grant proposals and keep substantial records on their assistance programs.

Increasing private donations may be the better long-term solution to increased demand for food bank services, but it is not clear how this could be accomplished. Changes in the tax

law might provide additional incentives for firms to channel food banks. Although existing tax law facilitates the food bank system, additional legislation has been proposed. The Good Samaritan Tax Act gives food banks the same tax treatment for donations as other charitable groups. Expanded gleaning and food recovery tax breaks are expected to increase the viability of food bank efforts to collect, transport, and store food.² Food thrown out by restaurants and grocery stores, or left in fields to rot, could feed 49 million people each year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.³

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 Alabama, given the low ranking its welfare policies received in the Tufts study. Greater support for anti-poverty and anti-hunger policies cannot be generated in the state so long as myths about the lazy poor and stereotypes of undeserving "welfare queens" go unchallenged by accurate profiles.

Food banks are becoming an institutionalized component of the social welfare system in most urban areas in the U.S. They are regularly included in the United Way budget, in the contributions of local civic clubs, and sometimes receive allocations from local governments. The density and capacity of agencies to serve the poor is higher in urban areas than in sparsely populated rural locales where distance and dispersal tend to be barriers to supplying and accessing donated food. Rural food distribution strategies are qualitatively different than those in larger communities because they must consider the smaller-scale and informal distributional system serving hungry rural people. Urban food assistance systems thus anchor a tenuous and dispersed network of rural food assistance providers that serve a distinctly different clientele population through a network of largely faith-based organizations. Future research can clarify the ways that urban systems can more effectively serve their rural catchment areas, specifically the unchurched and locales where pantries of any sponsorship do not exist.

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NOTES

1. America's Second Harvest (ASH) is the nation's fifth largest non-profit charitable organization (IRS 501c3) and the largest hunger relief charity in the United States.
2. October 1, 1996, President Clinton signed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act to encourage donation of food and grocery products to non-profit organizations for distribution to needy individuals. The law makes it easier to donate food in several ways.
 - It protects from liability when donating to a non-profit organization.
 - It protects from civil and criminal liability should the product donated in good faith later cause harm to the needy recipients.
 - It standardizes donor exposure to liability laws across the 50 states.
 - It sets a liability floor of "gross negligence" or intentional misconduct for persons who donate grocery products. Gross negligence is defined as "voluntary and conscious conduct by a person with knowledge (at the time of conduct) that the conduct is likely to be harmful to the health or well being of another person." Congress recognized that the provision of food close to the date of recommended retail sale is, in and of itself, not grounds for finding gross negligence. For example, cereal marked close to code date for retail sale can be donated.
3. Since 1983, the United States Department of Agriculture has supplemented private domestic hunger relief efforts through commodity donations made through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). TEFAP is the cornerstone program in the charitable efforts to feed America's hungry, and is the "bridge" between public and private hunger relief efforts. TEFAP is a unique community-based and community-supported federal nutrition program, which relies on volunteers at food banks and local agencies to prepare and distribute federally donated agricultural commodities to hungry people in those communities. At the urging of food banks and others, major reform of TEFAP was undertaken by the Congress in 1996 with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193). That legislation combined TEFAP with the Soup Kitchen/Food Bank Program, and authorized \$100 million in annual mandatory commodity purchases. (O'Brien, 1998)

