



Feeding the Hungry: Results from a Survey of Food Pantry Directors in Mid-Missouri¹

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Abstract

Given the current state of the US economy, emergency food assistance is an important piece of the food system for many American households. Yet, very little is known about the structure of operations of food banks in terms of where food is obtained, what types of food are provided and what structural opportunities and constraints are present. The Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security surveyed food pantry directors in Mid-Missouri in the summer of 2010 and this brief summarizes our findings. In general, we find that food pantries are accomplishing much with little and would like to see improvements in the quality and quantity of food available to give out to needy families, as well as capital improvements in their facilities (such as cold storage).

Introduction

Food pantries make up an important part of the social safety net in the U.S. In 2009, 4.8% of the American population—5.6 million households—accessed food from food pantries. The number of food pantry

users has risen more than 20% since the Great Recession began in late 2007 (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews & Carlson, 2010). According to the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), more than 724 million pounds of food were distributed across the U.S. in 2009 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) through local emergency feeding organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens. This number does not even include private food donations to food pantries and other emergency feeding organizations.

Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger relief organization, estimated that its affiliated food pantries in Missouri served over 728,000 individuals in 2009, suggesting that 12% of Missourians received food assistance from a food pantry that year. In 2009, 15% of Missourian households were categorized as "food insecure" (FRAC website, 2010), a term defined by the USDA as "a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food" (USDA website, 2010).

¹ This report was prepared by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri. The Center was established in 2004 in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. Participating faculty come from four MU colleges and are engaged in integrated programs of research, training, and extension focused on domestic food security issues. For more information, see the entire Missouri Hunger Atlas at missourifamilies.org/mohungeratlas.

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Given the sharp rise in levels of food insecurity with the recent economic recession, surprisingly little is known about the organizational capacity, food supply, and other services provided by food pantries. In fact, 2000 was the last year that food pantries were even counted on a national scale (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews & Carlson, 2010).

The University of Missouri Interdisciplinary Center on Food Security conducted a regional survey of Missouri food pantry directors to better understand the current operation of food pantries, what types of food is available, where the food is obtained, other services offered and the structural challenges and opportunities they face.

Study Methods

This study is based on a survey of food pantry directors that is embedded within a larger study of food pantry clients in mid-Missouri. The region of Missouri was defined by the service area of the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri, which delivers food to nearly 70 locations for off-site preparation and consumption, and in addition operates a mobile pantry that makes monthly visits to sites in the region. Before determining target pantries, however, we pared our list by removing any pantry servicing a monthly average of less than 0.75% of the regional total of food pantry clients served. This decision removed nearly 30 pantries from our list, but these facilities together served less than 15% of the total food pantry client population. Additionally, we removed two mobile pantries from our analytic sample for the director's survey.

The statistics in this report include results from 39 pantry facilities that together serviced more than 81.9% of food pantry clients in the region in 2009 and operating in 28 of the 32 counties serviced by the regional food bank. Food pantry directors were interviewed both in-person from July to September 2010 (n=35) and over the telephone in January 2011 (n=4). As a result of the study team's substantial contact with the organizations, 100 percent of food pantry directors within our analytic sample agreed to participate in the study.

Mid-Missouri Food Pantries

The food pantries represented in this study vary greatly in terms of size, operational age, and hours. The smallest food pantry serves an average of 250 clients per month, while the largest served 10,967 individuals. On average, 1,440 people

per month used each pantry in the three months prior to the survey. The pantries have been in operation from two years to 70 years, with an average of 17.4 years. More than half of the pantries are open at least once a week, but they range from one to 24 days open per month.

Getting the Work Done: Staff, Volunteers, and Facilities

The food pantries are operating with a largely part-time and volunteer staff. In terms of pantry directors, less than half (43.8%) are in paid positions, and only 28.2% work full time at the pantry. The directors have an average of 6.4 years in their position. About one third of the pantries have one or more paid staff members besides the director of the program, and only 29.4% of those paid staff members (representing 15.4% of pantries) are full time.

With so few paid or full time staff, the food pantries rely heavily on volunteers to carry out their work. Only one food pantry in the sample did not report using at least some volunteers. The other pantries use from three to 120 volunteers per month, with an average of 30 volunteers per month.

In terms of food pantry facilities, Table 1 portrays the directors' levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their pantries. The directors expressed the least satisfaction with their refrigeration capacity, with barely over half (57.1%) of those with refrigeration capacity saying they are "mostly or completely satisfied" with it. Another 10.3% of the pantries have no refrigeration on site at all.

	Satisfied (mostly or completely)	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	Unsatisfied (mostly or completely)	Do not have
Geographic location	94.9%	2.6%	2.6%	
Total amount of space	74.4%	2.6%	23.1%	
Quality of Space	71.8%	12.8%	15.4%	
Refrigeration	51.3%	2.6%	35.9%	10.3%
Freezer	69.2%	5.1%	23.1%	2.6%
Client waiting area	61.5%	10.3%	25.6%	2.6%
Client parking	59.0%	20.5%	17.9%	2.6%
Telephone service	51.3%	2.6%	10.3%	35.9%
FAX capacity	38.5%	7.7%	10.3%	43.6%
Copy machine	51.3%	7.7%	10.3%	30.8%
Internet	43.6%	5.1%	5.1%	46.2%
Computer system or record keeping	76.9%	5.1%	7.7%	10.3%

One surprising finding is that over one third of the pantries have no telephone service.

While Table 1 shows that over 80% of the pantries have a computer system or other type of recordkeeping, only 58.8% have a computerized database of pantry clients. Of the pantries with a database, 26.1% share the database with other pantries.

Organizational Status and Oversight

Many Missouri food pantries are affiliated with some type of umbrella organization (61.5%), though 35.9% are unique entities with their own nonprofit status. In terms of oversight, most of the pantries (87.2%) have a board of directors or an advisory board, and 59.0% have a strategic plan.

Independent of their nonprofit or affiliated status, the majority of pantries (71.8%) have a religious affiliation.

Food Sources

Overall, given the current level of need for food assistance in the state, pantry directors believe that they lack sufficient resources. While more than 40% of pantry directors said that food donations to their pantry increased from the previous year, nearly half of the directors believe that their pantry is not meeting the level of need in the community. In fact, food donations decreased from last year for 35.9% of the pantries. Two of the 39 pantries in the study had to turn “a handful” of clients away in the last month.

The major sources of food donations for pantries come from the regional food bank, local food drives, food purchased with cash donations, local farmers, and “other” sources.

By far, the most relied upon source of food is the Food Bank of Central and Northeast Missouri. More than half (58.9%) of the pantries get 90% or more of their food from the food bank. Most pantries (81.6%) receive one to two deliveries per month from the food bank. Local food drives are fairly widely used, as 81.6% of the 38 pantries that answered this question reported using food drives for at least some of their stock. The food drives do not result in a major portion of food pantry donations, however. Over 80% of the pantries that use food drives get 10% or less of their total food from that source. One benefit of using local food drives is the ability to request specific foods. Of the pantries that do use food drives, 62.5% requested particular foods, especially

canned goods (fruit, vegetables, and tuna in particular), peanut butter, and cereal.

Half of the food pantries use cash donations to buy food, and they obtain an average of 16.7% of their total food supply from this source. Cash donations appear to be an increasingly important source of food for the pantries. Of the 18 pantries that use cash donations, 38.1% increased the amount of food acquired this way in the last year, and 52.4% received the same amount.

In an effort to obtain fresh, local fruit and vegetables, 61.5% of the pantries work with local farmers to get food donations. Of all the pantries in this study, 53.8% get fresh vegetables from local farmers, 33.3% get fresh fruit. Of the pantries that work with local farmers, one third increased the amount of food they obtained over the previous year, and 50% obtained the same amount.

Other sources of food donations include Wal-Mart and other grocers, local businesses or community organizations (such as the Boy Scouts), and Share the Harvest (a Missouri Department of Conservation program that helps deer hunters share venison with organizations that provide free food). Forty-four percent of pantries report getting food from these other sources.

Table 2 shows the prevalence of certain food groups among the food offered by Missouri food pantries. Meat products are the most common type of food distributed, and hot dogs are by far the most regularly used meat product in the pantries’ food baskets.³ One fifth of Missouri pantries never offer dairy products, which is perhaps related to some pantries’ inadequate refrigeration capacity. Fruits and vegetables are somewhat available in the food supply, either in fresh, frozen, or especially canned form.

Food Pantries: Offering More than Just Food

Food pantries sometimes provide more than just baskets of food to their clients. Table 3 shows the diversity of programs and services that food pantries offer on site or through referrals or vouchers.

Well more than half (64.1%) of the pantries in this study offer on-site services of some kind. The most popular services to offer include utilities assistance and religious programming. About half of the pantries provide vouchers for off-site services within at least one category listed in Table 3.

³ The prevalence of hot dogs in our sample is due to the location of a major manufacturer of these products in the community of the regional food bank.

	Average months/year supplied	% pantries that never supply this good	% pantries that supply this good every month	% of all pantries supplying... (top three foods in each category)		
Meat	10.5	0%	61.5%	Hot dogs 74.4%	Chicken 51.3%	Hamburger 35.9%
Dairy	5.8	20.6%	15.4%	Yogurt 61.5%	Cheese 23.1%	Milk 17.9%
Fruit				Apples 56.4%	Oranges 30.8%	Bananas 15.4%
- Fresh	4.7	10.3%	15.4%			
- Frozen	3.2	41.0%	5.1%	-	-	-
- Canned	6.6	17.9%	35.9%	-	-	-
Vegetables				Potatoes 56.4%	Tomatoes 25.6%	Corn, cucumbers & lettuce 12.8%
- Fresh	6.7	5.1%	23.1%			
- Frozen	3.9	17.9%	5.1%	-	-	-
- Canned	8.0	12.8%	46.2%	-	-	-

	Any services	Utilities assistance	Thrift shop or clothing	Nutrition assistance	Education programming	Religious programming	Other
On-site services	64.1%	43.6%	17.9%	15.4%	15.4%	28.2%	25.6%
Vouchers for services	51.3%	25.6%	10.3%	23.1%	17.3%	25.6%	25.6%

“Other” on-site services include housing assistance, transportation-related services, or medical and health services. For example, on-site health screenings are held either weekly or monthly at 15.8% of the pantries. About 10% of the pantries offer nutrition classes, though only one pantry (2.6%) offers on-site nutritional counseling. Only three pantries (7.7%) offer on-site cooking demonstrations, often hosted by volunteers. “Other” voucher services include vouchers to other food providers or for gas.

Many of the food pantries post or share information with their clients. Nearly half of the pantries (46.1%) post nutritional information on site (which often comes from the University of Missouri Extension program). Over 60% of the pantries provide recipes to their clients. About half (51.3%) send out a newsletter that includes nutrition and health tips.

Besides the programs that they offer on site and through vouchers, 64.1% of food pantry directors encourage their clients to sign up for federal assistance programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Over 10% of directors (or their staff members) actually help the clients sign up for such programs.

When asked in an open-ended question for the kind of assistance the directors would offer to improve the health and nutrition outcomes of their clients if they had additional resources, they had many ideas. The directors could provide more than one answer for this question. More than half (56.4%) of the directors would begin or improve food education with services such as cooking demonstrations, recipe sharing, workshops on food shopping or storage, and more.

Nearly one third (30.8%) of the directors would provide “healthier foods” than they do now. Some of the directors specifically named a need for more fresh produce, healthier proteins, and providing a basket of foods that can create a full, healthy meal.

One-quarter of the directors (25.6%) cited a need for improved facilities. Most of those ideas revolved around needing more space – for more refrigeration, client waiting areas, parking, or more space in general. Some directors suggested specific additions to the facility such as microwaves for client use, a loading dock and new forklift for deliveries, or an exercise room.

Fifteen point four percent of the directors also suggested that they would provide more health-related activities. Their ideas included health screenings by visiting nurses, health classes, or providing a special table of foods for diabetics. 15.4% want to offer life skills training such as job counseling and workshops for household budgeting.

A few of the directors (12.8%) would offer new programming. Their ideas ranged from “buddy pack” food backpacks for kids, mentoring programs for kids, adding a soup kitchen to their pantry, or providing food deliveries to special needs clients. Less-often suggested ideas included creating new or improving old partnerships with other community groups (7.7%), providing household goods (5.1%) or clothing (5.1%), and adding staff (2.6%).

Conclusion

Providing healthy food options is a challenge for mid-Missouri food pantries. Nearly one third of the directors cited a need for healthier foods in their food baskets. One director specifically noted that they needed “less candy” in their food baskets. There is a need for healthier proteins beyond hot dogs (supplied by 75% of pantries), and one in five mid-Missouri pantries never offer dairy products at all. Some of these problems may be due to a lack of refrigeration or other facility options for the types of foods that the directors want most: fresh produce and healthier proteins. In addition, mid-Missouri food pantries are heavily dependent on the Food Bank of Central and Northeast Missouri, so a movement toward healthier food options would likely need to include changes at the food bank to make the biggest impact.

Besides providing healthy foods alone, more than half of the pantry directors indicated an interest in offering more and better food-related education. One director said, “Knowledge is power. If we share it in a creative way, people will listen.” These directors would like to offer more classes and workshops to teach their clients how to shop for, prepare, and store nutritious foods in their homes. A few of the directors (7.7%) also indicated interest in building partnerships with other community groups, which could result in joint efforts for food and nutrition education.

Finally, the survey responses indicate that mid-Missouri food pantries are indeed a source of social services beyond food assistance. More than half of the pantries (64.1%) in this study offer on-site services of some kind. While the pantries currently provide mostly utilities assistance (43.6% of pantries) and religious programming (28.2% of pantries), some directors would like to offer or improve on their health-related activities

(15.8%), new programming for kids and special needs clients (12.8%), or life skills classes like household budgeting (15.8%). These areas offer opportunities for mid-Missouri food pantries and their current and potential community partners.

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