

Single Mothers and Emergency Food Assistance in the Welfare Reform Era

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Abstract

This paper documents the characteristics, economic circumstances, and concurrent use of food stamps among single mothers using food pantries in Wisconsin in 1999. Single mothers who seek emergency food assistance have strong ties to the labor force, with almost half employed and most of the others having been employed during the past year. Most of these women use food pantries as an alternative, rather than a supplement, to food stamps, despite appearing to meet income criteria for food stamps. Concurrent food stamp use is more common among mothers with weaker employment ties, more recent welfare involvement, and greater levels of need. Single mothers who use food pantries and live in counties which have experienced large food stamp declines in the welfare reform years are less likely themselves to receive food stamps, despite high levels of need.

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INTRODUCTION

Emergency feeding organizations have always been an integral part of the nutritional safety net. However, indications of increasing demand on supplies of emergency food—coupled with the dramatic decline in food stamp and cash assistance caseloads—suggest that the relative importance of these organizations may be increasing. Unfortunately, our understanding of the role of the emergency food assistance network as a source of support for vulnerable families lags far behind our understanding of the role of the public support system. We know little of what predisposes families to turn to emergency food, or of the characteristics of those who use such support. Likewise, we have little information about the circumstances in which families use food pantries as a supplement or an alternative to public assistance programs. The growth in demand for emergency food and the corresponding decline in receipt of publicly provided assistance make these questions particularly compelling.

This paper begins to address these gaps by documenting the characteristics and circumstances of single mothers using food pantries in Wisconsin in 1999. I focus on single mothers because this is the group most dramatically affected by recent changes in the public assistance system. I identify several distinct segments among the single-mother food pantry clientele—working parents, the recently unemployed, the medium-term unemployed, and the long-term unemployed—and present profiles for each of these groups, highlighting their economic well-being, connections to public assistance programs, and perceived barriers to (better) jobs. In addition, I examine the factors associated with concurrent food stamp receipt, thus contributing to our understanding of food stamp uptake among vulnerable populations in the welfare reform era.

BACKGROUND AND PRIOR RESEARCH

The federal welfare reform legislation of 1996 resulted in a fundamental restructuring of the public safety net. The legislation encompassed far-reaching changes affecting a diverse group of low-income families, but the implications for single-parent families were particularly profound. The former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program was replaced by the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The more stringent requirements of TANF—including work requirements and time limits—contributed to a sharp decline in the number of families receiving assistance. Changes in cash assistance have coincided with changes in the Food Stamp Program, including the exclusion of many noncitizens and the strengthening of work requirements. In the wake of these policy changes, concern has been expressed over potential economic hardships among affected families—including hardships related to hunger and food insecurity.

Emerging evidence that these concerns are justified stems from the convergence of several strands of research. First, the prevalence of food insecurity among single-parent families is high relative to other groups. Second, the decline in cash assistance caseloads has been accompanied by a sharp decline in food stamp receipt, even among seemingly eligible families. Finally, emerging evidence from around the country suggests that the welfare reform era has been characterized by an increase in the demand for emergency food assistance. I provide a brief overview of the available evidence in each of these areas.

Food Insecurity among Single-Parent Families

Food security refers to having assured access at all times to enough food for a healthy and active life. Since 1995, the Census Bureau has included questions about food security in a special supplement to the annual Current Population Survey (CPS-FSS). These data document strikingly high rates of food insecurity among single-mother families relative to other families. In 1999, for instance, the food

insecurity rate among such households was 29.7 percent, compared with 10.1 percent among all households (Andrews et al., 2000). Furthermore, single mothers continue to fare worse than their married counterparts even when the sample is limited to the low-income population. Using a less formal measure of food insecurity from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), Zedlewski (2000) found that in 1999, 60 percent of children in low-income single-parent families lived in households in which the adults worried about or had problems affording food. Among children in low-income two-parent families, the comparable figure was 22 percent. Food-related hardships are also pronounced among a more narrowly defined group of (primarily) single mothers—those who have recently left the cash assistance caseload. Brauner and Loprest (1999) compiled results from a variety of state studies of welfare “leavers,” and found that 17–33 percent of recent leavers reported problems providing enough food for their families after exiting from welfare.

Food Stamps and Single Parents

Welfare reform coincided with a steep drop in the food stamp caseload. Between March 1994 and September 2000, the number of food stamp participants fell from 28 million to 17 million (USDA, 2001).¹ Slightly less than half of the recent decline reflects decreases in eligibility, while more than half of the caseload decline occurred because of nonparticipation among eligible individuals (USDA, 2001). Using data from the CPS-FSS, Nord (2001) found that food stamp use among low-income single-mother households—those below 130 percent of the poverty line—fell from 63.5 percent to 42.5 percent from 1995 to 1999, a larger decline than that seen among any other household type.

Recent research provides some insight into the reasons for nonparticipation by low-income families. Among former welfare recipients in the NSAF sample who had also exited from food stamps and who reported income below the poverty line, 52 percent listed a new job as a reason for no longer receiving food stamps—despite apparently continuing to meet income eligibility criteria. Administrative hassles were also frequently cited (30 percent). On the other hand, not wanting or needing support was

relatively uncommon (10 percent) (Zedlewski and Gruber, 2001). In Second Harvest's national survey of clients of food pantries, a strikingly similar story emerges. The most commonly stated reason for not applying for food stamps, among families with children, was presumed ineligibility (47 percent)—even though the vast majority met gross income guidelines (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen, 2001). Factors linked to program operation, such as the application process and the location or character of the office, were also frequently noted (30 percent), while lack of need was rarely mentioned (6 percent).

Most econometric analyses of the determinants of food stamp participation at the micro level use data that predate both the recent welfare reforms and the steep caseload decline of the late 1990s (see, for example, Blank and Ruggles, 1996; Daponte, 2000). A notable exception is Cancian and colleagues (2001), who used administrative data to examine food stamp uptake in two cohorts of welfare leavers in Wisconsin—those leaving welfare in 1995 and 1997. Determinants of food stamp uptake were similar among the two cohorts and suggest higher uptake among those with greater needs and with closer ties to the welfare system. For instance, food stamp participants tended to have more children, fewer adults in the household, a longer history of cash welfare, less education (in the early cohort only), a longer period of food stamp eligibility, and a greater concentration of single-parent families in their neighborhood. These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting that families with the highest potential benefits and the poorest long-term economic prospects are most likely to avail themselves of food stamps when eligible (see, for example, Blank and Ruggles, 1996; Daponte, Sanders, and Taylor, 1999).

Although declining food stamp participation among welfare leavers has received a good deal of attention, econometric analyses of the aggregate food stamp decline have had difficulty linking the decline to specific welfare reform policies. Such analyses have documented large impacts of the economy on caseload changes, and much smaller impacts of welfare policies, while leaving up to half of the overall decline unexplained (see, e.g., Figlio, Gundersen, and Ziliak, 2000; Wilde et al., 2000; Wallace and Blank, 1999). It may be that differences in the operationalization of welfare reform policies—such as

the messages that are conveyed regarding availability and desirability of economic assistance, and the ease with which potential applicants are able to access help—are more important than the policy parameters in influencing caseload sizes.

Single Parents, Food Pantries, and the Food Stamp Decline

The well-documented decline in food stamp receipt has occurred in tandem with an apparent increase, much less clearly documented, in the demand for emergency food assistance. The decentralized nature of the emergency food network presents a considerable challenge to researchers, and only limited efforts have been made to track emergency food demand in a systematic and ongoing fashion. Nonetheless, an emerging body of evidence suggests that demand for food from food pantries has increased over the past several years, and there is at least some evidence that welfare reform has contributed to this trend.

Much of the evidence suggesting an increase in food pantry demand comes from small-scale studies in narrowly defined geographical areas. The studies together tell a fairly consistent story of increasing demand, albeit of varying magnitude (see Food Security Institute, 2000, for an extensive compilation of the findings from local studies). Larger, multistate studies are also consistent with increasing demand. For instance, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2001) found that 92 percent of major cities reported a rise in emergency food assistance demand, with an average increase of 23 percent over the previous year. A forthcoming report by Ohls and Saleem-Ismail, cited in a recent report by the USDA (2001), found an average increase in demand of 5 percent per year from 1997 to 2000, based on provider estimates of emergency food demand. A recent study of the emergency food network in Detroit estimated that close to one-fifth of clients seeking assistance were doing so as a result of recent changes in the welfare system (Eisinger, 1999).

There is little firm evidence of how single parents have contributed to the increase in pantry demand. Anecdotal reports frequently point to single parents—particularly those affected by welfare

reform—as an important component of the increased demand. However, this is not apparent in the CPS-FSS, which shows no clear evidence of an upward trend in the prevalence of single parents among food pantry clientele (author’s calculations). We do know, though, that single-parent households make up a substantial share of pantry clientele—an estimated one-quarter to one-third, according to several recent studies (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen, 2001; Nichols-Casebolt and Morris, 2001). Among households that include children and that use food pantries, more than half are headed by a single parent (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen, 2001; Nichols-Casebolt and Morris, 2001). Furthermore, these estimates, drawn from client surveys, are consistent with data from the CPS-FSS. The latter shows that, among households reporting emergency food use in the 1995–1999 period, 28 to 32 percent were single parents; among households with children reporting emergency food use, 47 to 59 percent were single parents (author’s calculations).

The increase in food pantry usage, coupled with the food stamp decline, has raised important questions about whether emergency food assistance is substituting for publicly provided nutritional assistance for the low-income population. There is little conclusive evidence thus far. We do know that approximately one-quarter of food stamp leavers report using food pantries in the year following their exit from the program (Mills and Kornfeld, 2000), although it is not clear whether leaving food stamps was the cause. Approaching the question from a different perspective, we also know that the majority of food pantry clientele do not receive food stamps, despite having low incomes that strongly suggest eligibility (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen, 2001).

Taken as a whole, the various trends discussed here—the increase in pantry usage, the decline in both food stamps and cash assistance among low-income single parents, and the large share of single parents among pantry clientele—strongly suggest that food pantries have become an increasingly important component of the safety net for this population. However, surprisingly little research has looked specifically at single parents and food pantries. We know little of what predisposes single parents to seek emergency food, the characteristics of those who seek such support, and the circumstances under

which food pantries serve as a supplement or alternative to public assistance programs for this population.

This paper begins to address these gaps by documenting the characteristics, economic circumstances, and determinants of concurrent food stamp use among single mothers using food pantries in Wisconsin in 1999. My analyses build on other recent efforts to characterize food pantry clientele (see, for example, Nichols-Casebolt and Morris, 2001; Kim, Ohls, and Cohen, 2001) but differ in important ways, including an exclusive focus on single mothers and an analysis of the determinants of food stamp use.

The Wisconsin Context

Wisconsin is an appropriate location for this study because the state exhibits many of the trends discussed above. Wisconsin is at the forefront of states in both cash assistance and food stamp declines in the TANF era. At the same time, there is evidence of food-related hardships among mothers leaving welfare (Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 1999). Cross-sectional data show a food insecurity rate of 33 percent among a sample of single mothers in Wisconsin from the combined 1995–1999 CPS-FSS (author's calculations). Finally, food pantries in Wisconsin, like their counterparts elsewhere, report an increase in demand for assistance over the past several years (Wisconsin Food Security Consortium, 2001). The convergence of these trends suggests that much can be learned in Wisconsin about the role of food pantries as a component of the safety net for single-parent families in the welfare reform era.

As in most states, there is no comprehensive list of food pantries in Wisconsin, nor do pantries report to any central agency. A recent estimate by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (2001) indicates that there are approximately 575 food pantries in the state. These organizations are diverse in their operating procedures, with some having nominal income eligibility criteria (ranging from 100 to 150 percent of the poverty line) and with others having a mandate to serve all who seek

assistance. Pantries typically provide a 2- to 3-day supply of food, and vary in their rules regarding frequency with which assistance can be provided (Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, 2000).

DATA AND ANALYSES

Data

Data are from the Wisconsin Survey of Food Pantry Clients (WSFPC), a survey of persons using food pantries in 27 Wisconsin counties during October 1999. The survey was coordinated by University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, in collaboration with a variety of groups around the state, including local Hunger Prevention Councils, Human Services agencies, and other groups.²

The WSPFC was meant to serve two distinct purposes. First, it was designed to help county Extension offices, in collaboration with key community partners, to learn about the characteristics and circumstances of local food pantry clientele. Results were used to stimulate a variety of local food security initiatives such as food stamp outreach and public education. Second, it was designed to provide statewide data capable of addressing broader research questions about the role of emergency food assistance in the welfare reform era.

All county Extension offices in Wisconsin were invited to participate in the survey. Counties were selected for inclusion based on the willingness of a local Extension educator to play a coordinating role, although efforts were made to encourage participation among counties that were both demographically and geographically diverse. In participating counties, a local survey coordinator in the Extension office arranged for the participation of food pantries in the county. The local coordinators worked with the food pantries to ensure that surveys were administered according to a standard protocol.

All clients of participating pantries during October 1999 were asked to complete a voluntary, two-page, self-administered survey (available in English and Spanish). Extension and/or food pantry staff

were available to assist clients with the survey as needed. Clients were asked to not complete more than one survey during the month, regardless of how many times they sought assistance from a pantry. The survey included closed-ended questions on demographic characteristics, employment, self-identified barriers to having a job (or a better job), economic well-being, income sources, food stamp participation, AFDC history, and frequency of pantry usage. Participation rates among clients averaged 50 percent across the 27 counties, with no observable differences in client characteristics among counties with high versus low participation.

These data have both advantages and limitations. The most significant limitation is the estimated 50 percent response rate. While this is clearly lower than desirable, it also is likely an underestimate of the true response rate, because some repeat users show up twice in the denominator. This occurs because not all pantries keep track of unduplicated numbers of respondents, and because clients may have visited more than one pantry during the month. Another limitation is the nonrandom fashion in which participating counties were selected. The sample does not include Milwaukee County, the largest urban county in the state. The sample does, however, include counties from all regions of the state, and includes both urban and rural counties.³ Most important in terms of evaluating the significance of the above limitations, the overall demographics of the sample are similar to other recent studies of food pantry clientele nationwide.

Table 1 compares respondent characteristics from the WSFPC to those from the 2001 Second Harvest national survey of food pantry clients (Kim, Ohls, and Cohen 2001). The latter is a randomly selected sample of clients of Second Harvest Food Bank participating pantries. There may be underlying differences between pantry clientele in Wisconsin and the nation as a whole, and there may also have been changes from 1999 to 2001, but the comparison is nonetheless informative.

The Wisconsin sample is slightly more likely to include households with children (48 percent versus 43 percent for the Second Harvest sample) and equally likely to include single-parent households

TABLE 1
Comparison of Food Pantry Client Characteristics from Wisconsin Survey of Food Pantry Clients and Second Harvest's 2001 National Food Pantry Survey

	Wisconsin Survey of Food Pantry Clients (% of column)	Second Harvest (% of column)
Households with children	48%	43%
Single-parent households	26	26
Single parents as percentage of all households with children	55	50
Respondents aged 65+	20	22
Education		
Less than high school	37	38
High school	47	40
Some post-high school	16	22
Employed	32	25
Employed full-time	10	12

Source: Data from the Second Harvest survey are reported in Kim, Ohls, and Cohen (2001).

(26 percent). Both samples have similar shares of elderly clients (20 to 22 percent). Education levels are also similar, although Wisconsin has somewhat fewer respondents with any post-high school education (16 percent versus 22 percent). Respondents in both samples report similar rates of full-time employment (10 percent and 12 percent), though employment rates overall are somewhat higher in Wisconsin. This difference is consistent with the higher than average share of low-income parents who are employed in Wisconsin (Urban Institute, 1999).

An important strength of the WSFPC data is the large sample size—4,000 completed surveys—which allows a more detailed examination of single parents than would be possible with the smaller samples in most state and local studies of food pantry clients. The Wisconsin sample includes clients from a diverse group of food pantries—including larger pantries that are part of broader networks as well as smaller operations run by local religious and other nonprofit groups. The involvement of local coordinators who were well known and connected in their communities was essential to identifying and garnering the participation of these organizations.⁴

The sample for this analysis is limited to single mothers younger than 65. This includes 868 respondents. Single parents, predominantly mothers, make up 26 percent of the respondents in the WSFPC.

Analyses

The first set of analyses are descriptive, documenting the characteristics, economic circumstances, participation in public assistance programs, and perceived barriers to self-sufficiency among single mothers using food pantries. I identify several distinct segments among the single-mother clientele—working parents, the recently unemployed, the medium-term unemployed, and the long-term unemployed—and present profiles for each of these groups, highlighting key differences among them. This categorization is similar to that used by Nichols-Casebolt and Morris (2001) in describing a broader sample of food pantry clients in Virginia.

The second set of analyses seek to identify the factors associated with concurrent food stamp use among the single-mother food pantry clientele. Analyses of food stamp uptake in the welfare reform era have generally focused on continued food stamp participation (or, alternatively, food stamp exits) among welfare leavers or prior food stamp participants. My focus here is different, in that I am interested in food stamp use among mothers who are sufficiently vulnerable that they seek emergency food assistance, regardless of their past participation in food stamps or other welfare programs.⁵ As documented later in the paper, the vast majority of these mothers meet the gross income criteria for food stamp eligibility, although I am not able to screen for asset eligibility.⁶

I estimate a series of probit models in which the dependent variable is coded 1 if the mother reports food stamp receipt in the current month, and is coded 0 in the absence of receipt. I exclude mothers whose self-reported income is higher than food stamp eligibility limits. I expect food stamp participation to be greater among mothers with greater need for assistance, stronger ties to the welfare system, and weaker ties to employment.

Independent variables in my initial model include a vector of variables reflecting earnings capacity (including dummy variables denoting age, education, and presence of health-related employment barriers); a vector of variables representing family-related needs and responsibilities (including number of children, any children under age 5, and any children receiving Supplemental Security Income); and a vector of county-level variables. These include an indicator for urban counties, the county unemployment rate, and the percentage decline in the county food stamp caseload over the preceding 4 years.

The latter variable warrants further explanation. In the counties represented in the WSFPC, the food stamp caseload decline ranges from a low of 30 percent to a high of 63 percent between 1995 and 1999. I capitalize on this variation to assess the relationship between aggregate caseload declines in the years surrounding welfare reform and the likelihood of food stamp participation among single mothers seeking emergency food assistance. In doing so, I treat the caseload decline variable as proxying for its

underlying causes. To the extent that caseload declines were driven by reductions in need for assistance, such declines should not be associated with differential likelihood of food stamp receipt among clearly needy families such as those using food pantries. On the other hand, to the extent that caseload declines stem from reduced program awareness or access among those in need, the magnitude of the decline should be negatively correlated with food stamp participation among food pantry clientele.⁷

In my second model, I add a series of dummy variables reflecting current and past participation in TANF and/or AFDC. I differentiate among current W-2 participants, several cohorts of welfare leavers, and nonrecipients. The dramatic decline in welfare caseloads implies that not only are fewer mothers receiving welfare than in the past, but over time fewer and fewer mothers will have had any contact with the cash assistance system. As such, the relationship between welfare and food stamp participation among needy families can tell us much about the likely longer-term implications of welfare changes for the Food Stamp Program.

In my final model, I add a series of dummy variables denoting current and recent employment, differentiating among full-time workers, part-time workers, recently unemployed mothers, and mothers who have been out of work for 3 months or longer. I also include a variable indicating whether there are any other workers in the household. Research has documented low food stamp participation among eligible workers as compared with nonworkers (see, for example, McConnell and Ponza, 1999). Potential reasons include lower awareness of eligibility as well as greater costs of participation (due, perhaps, to greater reporting requirements and potential difficulty in scheduling appointments during work hours).

RESULTS

What Are the Characteristics and Circumstances of Single Parents Using Food Pantries?

Demographics and Economic Circumstances. Table 2 provides a snapshot of the characteristics and circumstances of single mothers seeking emergency food assistance. Two-thirds of the mothers in the

TABLE 2
Characteristics of Single Mothers Using Food Pantries in Wisconsin

N	868
Age	
24 or younger	17%
25–34	33%
35–44	33%
45–54	14%
55–64	3%
Education	
Less than high school	30%
High school / GED	49%
Some post-high school	21%
Monthly household income	
<\$500	32%
\$500–\$1000	48%
\$1001–\$1500	18%
>\$1500	2%
Prevalence of material hardships in past 12 months^a	
Food-related hardship	34%
Utility-related hardship	32%
Health-related hardship	30%
Housing-related hardship	27%
Any hardships	69%

^aFood-related hardships refer to missing meals due to lack of food; utility hardships refer to having phone, heat, or electricity cut off; health-related hardships refer to adults or children not being able to afford needed health care; and housing-related hardships refer to being evicted, going homeless, or sharing housing because of not being able afford one's own.

food pantry sample are aged 25–44, with roughly one-sixth younger than 25 and one-sixth older than 44. Educational attainment is generally low. Close to one-third of the mothers have neither completed high school nor received a GED, and only one-fifth have any post-high school education.

As expected, the mothers in the food pantry sample report extremely low household incomes. One-third report income of less than \$500 per month, almost half report \$500–\$1,000 per month, 18 percent report \$1,001 to \$1,500, and only 2 percent report monthly income above \$1,500. Consistent with their low incomes, the mothers report high rates of material hardship during the past year. The data include information about a range of hardships, which I classify into four groups:

- *Food hardships* indicate that someone in the household missed a meal due to lack of food in the past year.
- *Utility hardships* indicate that the respondent had her phone, electricity, and/or heat cut off at some point in the year.
- *Housing hardships* indicate the respondent was evicted, was homeless, and/or shared housing because she was unable to afford her own.
- *Health care hardships* indicate that the mother or children were unable to afford needed health care during the year.

Food hardships were common, noted by 34 percent of the mothers. Food hardships almost always involved an adult missing meals (32 percent) and less frequently involved children (8 percent) (not shown). Utility hardships were also common, reported by nearly one-third (32 percent) of the mothers. Likewise, health care hardships were reported by 30 percent of mothers. These usually involved the mother going without needed care (26 percent), but frequently involved the children as well (17 percent) (not shown). Finally, 27 percent of the mothers reported housing-related hardships. Overall, more than two-thirds of the mothers reported at least one of these hardships. Taken as a whole, the income and hardship results confirm that single mothers using pantries are a severely disadvantaged population.

Connection with Public and Private Assistance Programs. To understand the role of food pantries as a safety net for single mothers, it is important to understand the extent to which these mothers are also

connected with relevant public assistance programs (Table 3). I focus here on participation in three key programs: food stamps, TANF, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Among the most striking findings is that only about one-quarter (26 percent) of the mothers report receiving food stamps during the current month. For the large majority of single mothers, emergency food appears to operate as an alternative, rather than a supplement, to the primary form of publicly provided nutritional assistance. The low rate of food stamp participation among food pantry clientele is consistent with the dramatic food stamp decline that has occurred in the state.⁸

Despite low food stamp reciprocity, the vast majority of mothers in this sample appear to meet the gross income criteria for food stamp eligibility.⁹ It is likely that some are ineligible on the basis of assets—an issue I cannot examine with these data. On the basis of past research, I expect ineligibility due to assets to play a relatively minor, although clearly not inconsequential, role.¹⁰ I explore the issue of food stamp participation in more detail in subsequent multivariate analyses.

Lack of current connection to public assistance programs is not limited to food stamps. Only 12 percent of the single mothers who use food pantries report current involvement in Wisconsin Works (W-2), Wisconsin's TANF program. Among those who do participate in W-2, the majority receive only noncash assistance. The low participation in W-2 is consistent with the extremely low W-2 caseloads during the time of the survey. During the month of the survey, there were fewer than 600 open W-2 cases in the 27 counties in the survey sample (Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 2002).

Despite low rates of current participation, most of the mothers have, at some point, received assistance from either W-2 or, more commonly, the old AFDC program. Forty percent are relatively recent welfare leavers, that is, they have left the welfare caseloads in the past 4 years (i.e., since 1995). An additional 21 percent last received AFDC prior to 1995, while only one-quarter of the mothers reported no past or present participation in AFDC or W-2. The large share of welfare leavers is of particular interest given concerns that welfare reform may be contributing to increased demands on

TABLE 3
Participation in Public Assistance Programs among Single Mothers Using Food Pantries

Food Stamps	26%
Supplemental Security Income	23%
(SSI for adult)	15%
(SSI for child)	11%
Current and past welfare participation	
Current W-2 participant	12%
W-2 or AFDC since 1995	40%
W-2 or AFDC before 1995	21%
Never received W-2 or AFDC	26%

emergency providers. Although the current study cannot speak to that issue directly, the data do clearly indicate that single mothers who have left the welfare rolls over the past several years constitute a sizable share of the total single-mother pantry clientele.

Finally, results illustrate that participation in SSI, which provides cash assistance to adults and children with permanent and total disabilities, was almost twice as common as participation in W-2. Almost one-quarter of the mothers reported receiving SSI, including 15 percent who received such income for an adult and 11 percent for a child.

Profiles of Key Groups of Pantry Clientele

Focusing on the full sample of single mothers obscures important differences among them. To better understand the current circumstances and the factors that prevent self-sufficiency among the single-mother clientele, I look in more detail at four subgroups: employed mothers, the recently unemployed (defined as having been out of work for less than 3 months), the medium-term unemployed (out of work for 3 to 12 months), and the long-term unemployed (out of work for more than a year). These groups have fairly distinct profiles and report widely varying employment barriers.

Employed Mothers. Employed mothers make up the largest group of the single-mother pantry clientele—almost 50 percent (Table 4). This is a strikingly high figure, given the perception of the emergency food network as a temporary safety net for persons in crisis. Seventy percent of the employed mothers work on a part-time basis, usually more than 20 hours per week (not shown).

Employed mothers are quite similar to the sample as a whole in terms of age, educational attainment, and income (see Table 2 for comparison). They report rates of material hardship that are similar to or higher than those reported by the other subgroups. Almost 40 percent report food-related hardships, 35 percent report utility hardships, 27 percent report housing hardships, and 38 percent report health-related hardships. Health-related hardships, in particular, are much more common among

TABLE 4
Differences among Subgroups of Single Mothers Using Food Pantries

	Long-term Unemployed (% of col)	Medium-term Unemployed (% of col)	Recently Unemployed (% of col)	Employed (% of col)
Percentage of sample	23%	15%	15%	47%
CHARACTERISTICS				
Full-time workers				30%
Age**				
<25	6%	19%	23%	20%
25–34	20	29	46	37
35–44	41	35	25	33
45+	33	17	5	10
Education				
Less than high school	33	32	30	25
High school / GED	44	49	44	54
Some post-high school	23	19	26	21
Income/Month**				
<\$500	23	41	53	27
\$500–\$1000	59	47	38	48
\$1001–\$1500	17	10	9	22
>\$1500	1	2	0	3
Hardships				
Food	33	31	38	39
Utility	29	35	36	35
Housing**	20	31	43	27
Health**	17	31	28	38
Any**	62	73	79	73
Program Participation				
Food stamps**	31	38	30	21
W-2*	7	15	17	12
SSI - child**	22	13	5	7
SSI - adult**	53	11	2	3
SSI - any**	64	23	7	10
Visits to Any Food Pantry in Past Year**				
1	16	21	31	20
2–3	22	24	38	30
4–6	24	23	14	21
7+	38	33	17	29

(table continues)

TABLE 4, continued

	Long-term Unemployed (% of col)	Medium-term Unemployed (% of col)	Recently Unemployed (% of col)	Employed (% of col)
Wages (if employed)				
\$5.15/hour or less				19%
\$5.16–\$6.00/hour				20
\$6.01–\$7.00/hour				21
\$7.01–\$8.00/hour				24
\$8.01–\$10.00/hour				15
>\$10.00/hour				2
EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS				
Problem Finding and Keeping Jobs				
Problem with job availability ^{***}	7%	17%	32%	20%
Lack of skills, education, and/or work experience ^{**}	16	15	13	27
Lack of Essential Resources				
Problem finding or affording child care [*]	10	20	26	20
Lack of transportation [*]	11	10	20	12
Homeless/housing problems ^{**}	2	4	9	3
Health-Related Concerns				
Health/disability—long-term ^{**}	56	28	8	7
Health/disability—short-term [*]	7	14	11	7
Health/disability—duration unspecified ^{**}	5	2	1	<1
Any health or disability concerns ^{**}	67	43	20	14
Would lose Medicaid [*]	7	4	3	2
Personal and Family Responsibilities and Priorities				
Prefer to be home with children	13	9	9	8
Caring for disabled family member ^{**}	9	8	1	3
In school [*]	1	8	3	4
Other Personal Circumstances^b	5	4	5	3

** = significant difference (p<.01) among employment groups

* = significant difference (p<.05) among employment groups

= significant difference (p<.10) among employment groups

^aIncludes “Can’t find a (better) job” and “No jobs near where I live.”

^bIncludes a wide range of barriers reflecting personal circumstances such as alcohol problems, criminal record, partner stops me from working, lack of English, lack of Green Card, etc. Many were provided in response to open-ended “other” choice.

employed than unemployed mothers, perhaps reflecting the difficulties facing the working poor in securing access to either public or private health insurance.

Despite low wages and widespread material hardships, the employed mothers are significantly less likely to receive food stamps than are other mothers, with only 21 percent reporting food stamp receipt. As for the sample as a whole, almost all of the employed mothers appear to meet gross income eligibility criteria. Not surprisingly, these mothers and their children have quite low rates of participation in other public assistance programs, including W-2 (12 percent) and SSI (10 percent). They vary in the extent of their food pantry usage, with half being new or light users (1–3 visits in the past year), and half being moderate (4–6 visits) or heavy users (7 or more visits).

Wages of roughly \$8 per hour are often used to proxy for “living wages,” that is, wages sufficient to bring a family of four to the poverty line. The vast majority of mothers (83 percent) earned wages below this level, including almost two-fifths earning \$6 per hour or less. What factors prevent these mothers from getting better jobs? The survey included a list of potential job barriers, and respondents were asked to select all that were relevant (with the option of providing additional responses). A wide range of factors were cited, but limited job readiness, lack of jobs, and problems finding or affording child care were by far the most common. More than one-quarter listed lack of necessary job skills, experience, and/or education as barriers to a better job—the highest rate for any of the subgroups examined here—and 20 percent indicated that they could not find a better job and/or no jobs were available in the area. A similar share cited problems finding and/or affording adequate child care.

Recently Unemployed Mothers. Recently unemployed mothers—those who have been out of work for less than 3 months—make up a much smaller share of the single-mother clientele. Only 15 percent of the mothers fall into this category. This is ironic, given the development of the emergency food assistance network as a temporary safety net for persons in short-term crisis situations. The recently

unemployed mothers are somewhat younger than their employed counterparts, with two-thirds younger than 35.

In terms of income, the recently unemployed mothers fare considerably worse than any of the other groups. More than half are in the lowest income range—less than \$500 in the current month—and only 9 percent report monthly income over \$1,000. Consistent with this, they report high rates of material hardships. The most notable difference from other groups is in the prevalence of housing-related hardships, reported by a striking 43 percent of the recently unemployed. Finally, 28 percent of these mothers report health care hardships, which is significantly lower than reported by employed mothers. Four-fifths of the recently unemployed mothers report at least one material hardship in the past year—the highest rate among the four groups. The low incomes and frequent hardships, particularly housing hardships, suggest that the recently unemployed mothers are in an extremely unstable situation, consistent with a recent job loss.

To what extent have these mothers connected with the public support system? They are significantly more likely to receive food stamps than their employed counterparts, though the rate is still quite low (30 percent). Likewise, they report higher than average involvement in W-2 (17 percent). They have low rates of SSI receipt, comparable to the employed mothers. Not surprisingly, they report less frequent pantry use in the past year than do any of the other groups. More than two-thirds (69 percent) are new or light users, while only 31 percent are moderate or heavy users. Again, this is consistent with their recent change in economic circumstances, and is consistent with the original intent of the emergency feeding network.

There is considerable variation in the factors that prevent these mothers from getting a job. By far the most common barrier, though, is inability to find a job or lack of jobs in the area, cited by one-third of the recently unemployed mothers. Other widely cited job barriers include lack of adequate or affordable childcare (26 percent), lack of transportation (20 percent), health and disability problems (20

percent), and, to a lesser extent, lack of job skills, experience, or education (13 percent). Clearly, these mothers face a wide range of challenges in returning to work. It is notable that the majority of barriers cited reflect perceived lack of sufficient opportunities and/or work-related supports, rather than personal or family-related issues.

Long-Term Unemployed Mothers. At the other end of the spectrum are those mothers who have been out of work for longer than a year—including almost one-quarter (23 percent) of all single mothers using food pantries. These mothers are considerably older than any of the other groups. In terms of income, the long-term unemployed mothers fare considerably better than the recently unemployed, and are only half as likely to be in the lowest income group (23 percent versus 53 percent for the recently unemployed). Likewise, they have substantially lower (though still high) rates of material hardships than do any of the other groups, particularly in the areas of housing (20 percent) and health care (17 percent).

These mothers' connection to the public assistance system is informative. The food stamp reciprocity rate, 31 percent, is comparable to that of the recently unemployed. On the other hand, there is a dramatic difference in the prevalence of SSI income. Almost two-thirds of the long-term unemployed mothers report receiving SSI, including 53 percent who receive such income for an adult and 22 percent who receive it for a child. Given the very stringent disability standards which control SSI eligibility, the long-term unemployed mothers are almost certainly dominated by those who have limited prospects for returning to work. The long-term unemployed are also the most frequent food pantry users among the various groups of single mothers. Only 38 percent are first-time or light users, while 62 percent are moderate to heavy users. On balance, this appears to be a group whose economic situation has to some degree stabilized and for whom food pantries play an ongoing role in meeting basic needs.

What prevents these mothers from working? A disability or health problem is by far the most widely reported barrier to employment, noted by two-thirds of respondents. In most of these cases, the disability or health problem is long-term. All other potential barriers play a minor role. For instance, only

16 percent of the long-term unemployed note lack of skills, experience, or education as a barrier to getting a job, and a strikingly low 7 percent list not being able to find a job as a barrier. Lack of supportive services is also infrequently cited, with 11 percent of mothers noting lack of transportation and 10 percent noting inability to find and/or afford child care. Family responsibilities are somewhat more prevalent than among other groups. Thus, 13 percent of the long-term unemployed mothers indicate that they prefer to be home with their children, while 9 percent list caring for a disabled family member as a barrier to getting a job.

The Medium-Term Unemployed. The final group includes the medium-term unemployed, those who have been out of work for 3 to 12 months. In terms of demographic characteristics, economic circumstances, and barriers to work, these mothers are very much a cross between the recently unemployed and the long-term unemployed. I do not discuss this group in detail here, although they are included in Table 4.

Which Food Pantry Clients Receive Food Stamps?

The low rate of food stamp receipt among all subsets of the sample is troubling, especially in combination with the low incomes and high rates of hardship reported by the mothers. As discussed earlier, most mothers appear to meet gross income eligibility criteria, though I am not able to assess eligibility using additional income and asset rules.

I estimate a series of probit models to identify factors linked to concurrent food stamp receipt among the single-mother pantry clientele. I exclude the mothers whose self-reported income exceeds gross income limits for food stamps.¹¹ Results are shown in Table 5. Model 1 includes individual-level variables reflecting earnings capacity and family needs and responsibilities, as well as several county-level variables. Looking first at the earnings capacity variables, results indicate that mothers with health conditions or disabilities preventing them from finding a job, or a better job, are significantly more likely to receive food stamps than are other mothers. This is true for both short-term and long-term disabilities.

TABLE 5
Probit Models of Food Stamp Participation among Single Mothers Using Food Pantries

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Earnings Capacity						
Age						
<25	(omit)		(omit)		(omit)	
25–34	.274#	.156	.221	.163	.175	.168
35–44	-.025	.169	.028	.178	-.004	.182
45–64	.031	.193	.075	.203	.083	.208
Education						
Less than high school	.001	.113	-.015	.117	-.038	.120
High school	(omit)		(omit)		(omit)	
Some post-high school	.057	.125	-.010	.129	-.004	.131
Disability/health limitations						
Long-term	.480**	.127	.529**	.130	.342*	.169
Short-term	.618**	.201	.520*	.206	.370#	.214
Unspecified	.569	.361	.605	.377	.376	.383
Child and Family Responsibilities						
Number of children in household	.070#	.038	.045	.040	.063	.041
Any children under 5	.145	.111	.198#	.117	.209#	.119
Child(ren) on SSI	-.324*	.158	-.361*	.163	-.391*	.166
County Indicators						
Urban	-.070	.099	-.132	.203	-.171	.106
Unemployment rate	.043	.062	.049	.065	.023	.066
Percent decline in food stamp caseload 1995–1999	-.019*	.009	-.017#	.009	-.017#	.009
Welfare History						
Current W-2 recipient			1.322**	.175	1.326**	.178
Left welfare >=1997			.659**	.144	.700**	.147
Left welfare 1995–1996			.642**	.188	.653**	.190
Left welfare before 1995			.330*	.163	.365*	.167
Never on welfare			(omit)		(omit)	

(table continues)

TABLE 5, continued

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Employment						
Respondent employment						
Full-time					-.543**	.189
Part-time					-.297*	.151
Unemployed <=3 months					-.274	.180
Unemployed 4+ months					(omit)	
Other worker in household					-.409**	.153
Intercept	-.241	.399	-.782#	.420	-.319	.449
N	861		861		861	
Log likelihood	-472.32		-439.51		-430.25	

Note: Model also includes variables denoting missing age, education, and employment status.
 # = $p < .10$, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

Some evidence suggests that age is linked to food stamp participation, with a marginally significant positive coefficient for mothers 25 to 34 (versus mothers under 25). On the other hand, education does not appear linked to food stamp participation among food pantry clientele.

The next variables denote family and child-related needs. Mothers with more than one child are more likely to receive food stamps, though this is only marginally significant. On the other hand, having a young child does not appear linked to food stamp receipt, despite the presumed higher needs associated with young children. Finally, the model yields the unexpected result that mothers with a child on SSI are significantly less likely to receive food stamps. This relationship is counterintuitive, given the presumed higher needs of mothers with a disabled child.

I turn next to the county-level variables. Neither the urban indicator nor the unemployment rate is statistically significant. The aggregate food stamp caseload decline, however, is negative and significant. This indicates that reductions in food stamp utilization in the years surrounding welfare reform are linked to lower food stamp participation among mothers unable to meet their basic nutritional needs through conventional channels.

In Model 2, I add variables denoting current and past welfare experience (AFDC and/or W-2). The effect of these variables clearly dominates the model. The likelihood of food stamp participation increases with the recency of welfare experience, net of the other variables in the model. The participation rate is lowest among the pantry clients with no past welfare experience, higher among clients who have received welfare in the past (particularly recent leavers), and highest among current W-2 recipients. The addition of the welfare history variables has only minor impacts on the coefficients on the original variables, though it does sometimes alter statistical significance. None of the age variables is significant; the coefficient for multiple children decreases and is no longer significant; and the coefficient denoting young children increases somewhat and is marginally significant.

In the final model, I also add variables denoting current and recent employment. As expected, employment is a strong predictor of food stamp receipt. Compared with mothers who have been out of work for more than 3 months, mothers working full time are significantly less likely to receive food stamps; mothers working part-time are somewhat less likely; and recently unemployed mothers have a coefficient comparable to the part-time mothers, though it does not reach significance. Employment of other household members is important as well, with lower participation when other adults in the household have jobs. The addition of the employment variables has very little impact on the other variables. An exception is the disability indicators, which decrease substantially in magnitude. This suggests that much of the impact of disabilities on food stamp receipt operates through its link to employment—that is, mothers with disabilities are less likely to work and this increases their probability of food stamp participation. In this model, the coefficient denoting urban counties increases in magnitude and approaches significance ($p=.11$), providing weak evidence of lower food stamp uptake among pantry clientele in urban versus rural counties. The aggregate food stamp caseload decline remains negative and marginally significant ($p<.10$).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided an exploratory analysis of the characteristics and circumstances of single mothers using food pantries in Wisconsin in the welfare reform era. My results confirm that single mothers who seek emergency food assistance are an economically disadvantaged group, as evidenced by low incomes and high rates of material hardship. They do, however, exhibit strong ties to the labor force, with almost half being employed—usually part-time—and fewer than one-quarter not having worked for longer than a year. Pantry clientele report extremely limited involvement with the primary public supports available to low-income parents, namely food stamps and W-2. However, many are past welfare

recipients—40 percent are relatively recent welfare leavers, having last received AFDC or W-2 in 1995 or later, and an additional 21 percent are longer-term leavers.

Closer examination of the single-mother clientele reveals distinct subgroups, with diverse circumstances and needs—and the emergency food network serves different roles for these different groups. Single mothers who use food pantries are, in short, a broad cross section of the low-income population. They include the working poor, who struggle to support themselves with limited education and skills, poor job opportunities, and challenges finding and paying for the child care they need; the newly unemployed, who often lack sufficient job opportunities or necessary work-related supports, and who tend to be new users of food pantries; and the long-term unemployed, many of whom have significant health problems that make employment an unlikely outcome, and who tend to be ongoing, regular users of the “emergency” food network.

Can the public support system do more to help these families? The low rate of food stamp receipt suggests that for most families, food pantries are functioning as an alternative—not a supplement—to food stamps. At the same time, virtually all appear to meet the gross income requirements for food stamps, to the extent that I am able to ascertain this from the data at hand.

Multivariate analyses of concurrent food stamp receipt highlight the importance of employment and welfare history as determinants of food stamp participation. Net of observable individual and county-level characteristics, employed mothers are much less likely to use food stamps than are their nonemployed counterparts. Furthermore, food stamp use becomes less common as time away from the welfare system increases. Unfortunately, these relationships do not bode well for future participation in the Food Stamp Program among eligible parents. Single mothers will be increasingly likely to be employed (though downturns in the economy may temporarily reverse this pattern) and increasingly unlikely to have any current or past linkages with the cash welfare system, if recent trends are any indication.

Among the most striking findings is that single mothers who use food pantries and live in counties that have experienced large food stamp declines in the welfare reform years are less likely themselves to receive food stamps, despite high levels of need. This implies that differences in the magnitude of caseload declines cannot be fully explained by differences in underlying need, but, rather, reflect differences in access (broadly defined) among needy families. Understanding the factors that affect food stamp participation among needy families—including the possible role of welfare reform implementation—is a particularly compelling goal. Greater efforts to link needy families, including those using food pantries, to food stamps and other available economic assistance programs are critical.

Endnotes

1. The food stamp caseload has increased since 2000. Researchers have thus far not examined the components of this increase.

2. University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension involves a partnership of the University of Wisconsin, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and counties throughout the state. Extension agents, housed in Extension offices in each of Wisconsin's counties, provide educational programs and conduct applied research in areas ranging from farming and food security to parenting and youth development.

3. Counties in the WSFPC sample include Adams, Barron, Buffalo, Columbia, Dodge, Eau Claire, Florence, Fond du Lac, Iowa, Iron, Grant, Green Lake, La Crosse, Lafayette, Langlade, Manitowoc, Marinette, Oneida, Pepin, Rock, Sauk, Shawano, Taylor, Trempeleau, Walworth, Waupaca, and Winnebago.

4. Because there is no comprehensive directory of food pantries in Wisconsin, it is not possible to determine the share of pantries that took part in this survey. The number of participating pantries ranged from one to nine per county.

5. It is possible that food stamp participation and food pantry use are jointly determined, or that food stamp participation affects the likelihood of subsequent food pantry use. I am unable to explore these possibilities with data limited to food pantry clientele.

6. Households, except those with elderly or disabled members, must have gross incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line. All households must have net incomes—or incomes after allowable deductions for shelter, child care, and certain other expenses—below 100 percent of the poverty line. Most households must have below \$2,000 in countable resources (such as bank accounts, cash, stocks and bonds, etc), and there is also a limit on the value of a vehicle. While federal policy excludes many legal immigrants, such immigrants are covered in Wisconsin by state funds (Food Research and Action Center, 2000).

7. Such a relationship could come about in one of two ways. Lower food stamp awareness or access among needy families could induce more families to turn to food pantries for assistance; alternatively, lower food stamp awareness or access could contribute to lower food stamp usage among families that would have used pantries regardless of food stamp receipt. Either of these would lead to a negative association between the aggregate food stamp decline and observed food stamp usage among pantry clientele.

8. Wisconsin, like the country overall, has experienced a partial rebound in food stamp caseloads in the period after this study was conducted.

9. While I cannot ascertain exact income-to-poverty ratios due to income being reported in ranges, fewer than 1 percent of the mothers (n=7) report income that is clearly above the cutoff for their household size, and only 9 percent report income in a range that spans the eligibility threshold for their household size.

10. Blank and Ruggles (1996) used data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to examine food stamp participation among eligible single mothers, imputing eligibility with and without considering asset criteria. Incorporating asset limits increased the estimated take-up rate from 54 percent to 66 percent. Daponte, Sanders, and Taylor (1999) calculated eligibility with and without screening for assets and found a somewhat larger impact of assets on estimated take-up rates. However, their sample was not limited to single parents, and the average household head was 12 years older than the mothers in the current sample (mean age 47 versus 35). As such, assets were likely more common among that population than among the single-mother sample studied here.

11. I obtain comparable results to those reported here when I also exclude mothers with uncertain food stamp eligibility, that is, those whose incomes fall in a range that spans the eligibility threshold.

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