

Making ends meet: An examination of TANF and former TANF food pantry
users in Virginia

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While public food assistance strategies such as food stamps, WIC, and school lunch and breakfast programs have been shown to be effective in improving the purchasing power and nutritional status of targeted populations (American Dietetic Association, 1998), there is a growing concern that a large segment of low-income Americans are slipping through, or not adequately served by the public safety net. This concern has become particularly acute with the latest round of welfare reforms which emphasize diversion of people from welfare programs, and rapid movement of individuals from welfare to work. It has been suggested that many of these individuals are turning to the private network of hunger relief programs for their nourishment.

Typically referred to as emergency food relief (EFR) programs, private programs have provided food assistance at the local level for over 200 years. Most were historically established as temporary stopgap measures when there was an economic hardship, and once the crisis abated, they closed their doors until the next economic downturn. This 200 year old cyclical trend, however, appears to be changing, with many privately-sponsored “emergency” programs becoming an integral component of the ongoing food assistance network in virtually every locale. In spite of a robust economy during the late 1990s and into 2000, there have been reports of increases in demand at private food assistance sites (Second Harvest, 2001), giving some support to the speculation that families affected by the 1996 PRWORA are needing to seek assistance from the private sector to feed their families.

In this project, data collected in 2001 from a sample of food pantry recipients in Virginia are used: (1) to increase our understanding of current TANF and former-TANF (defined as those who left TANF within the past six months) households who find it necessary to seek private food

assistance from a food pantry; and (2) to conduct an exploratory examination of the relationship between the food security status of these pantry recipients and their use of the food subsidy provided by a pantry.

Data collected in 2001 are compared to three years of data (1997, 1998, and 1999) that have previously been collected from these Virginia sites, allowing us to do some examination of recipient characteristics across years. Descriptive data on families with children who use food pantries are presented, along with an assessment of various “hardships” these families have experienced within the previous six months. Particular attention is given to examining change over time in TANF and food stamp participation rates, the food security status of pantry users, and how food pantries assist these families to make ends meet.

Private Food Assistance

The two major private food assistance programs are *food pantries*, which distribute free food and grocery items to individuals and families, and *soup kitchens*, which provide prepared on-site meals for individuals and families. Both programs are locally operated by sectarian and nonsectarian charities and groups of concerned citizens. Food and funds for operating costs are obtained from several sources, including donations from individuals and groups, as well as public monies and surplus food through the Federal Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).¹ Almost all of these sites receive a portion of their food items from a local or regional *food bank*. These food banks are nonprofit, community based warehouses which solicit, store and distribute food from local producers, retail food sources, the federal commodity distribution program and the food industry.

While there are no precise numbers, Second Harvest, one of the largest private food distribution organizations, estimates that in 2001 they had a network of over 190 regional food

banks, providing food to over 26,000 food pantries and almost 6,000 soup kitchens nationwide (Second Harvest, 2001). Determining the numbers of individuals who seek assistance at EFR programs is even more difficult. The 2000 Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey's annual survey found that approximately 2.8 percent of all surveyed *households* reported receiving emergency food from a food pantry or soup kitchen within the previous 12 months (Nord, Kabbani, Tiehen, Andrews, Bickel & Carlson, 2002). This represents approximately 8.6 million persons who reported turning to one of these sites to help feed themselves and their families. This is a slight decrease from the reported percentage who used a pantry or soup kitchen in 1998, but the "total annual usage probably increased somewhat during the period because of increased frequency of visits and population growth (Nord et al, p. 29).

Second Harvest's estimate of those seeking assistance at its sites in 2001 is even more dramatic. Their network of providers reported serving over 22.6 million (unduplicated) individuals at pantries and kitchens (Second Harvest, 2001). The substantial differences in these estimates is likely due to how these numbers are estimated from the two surveys. The Second Harvest survey asks provider agencies for an estimate of the numbers served, whereas the CPS asks individuals within their survey if they have sought assistance at a pantry or soup kitchen within the last 12 months. In addition, the CPS only surveys those individuals for whom they have addresses that are associated with housing units, whereas Second Harvest surveys individuals who come to feeding sites, many of whom have no housing or permanent address.

Although determining the numbers of EFR clients is problematic, there seems to be agreement that private food assistance programs fill an important need in local communities. However, the availability of private as well as public food assistance does not assure that households will be food secure - that is that they have access at all times to enough food for a healthy life. In

2000, less than 88 percent of all individuals were food secure, and only 82 percent of children were food secure. In addition, the most recent data on food security found that between 1995 and 2000 there was an increase in the percentage of low-income households who were food insecure. In 1995, 29.1 percent of households below 130 percent of poverty were measured as food insecure (Bickel, Carlson, & Nord, 1999), whereas by 2000 that percentage had increased to 33 percent (Nord, et al., 2002).

Not surprisingly, several studies have shown that the majority of those who use food pantries are food insecure (Daponte, 1996; Olson, Rauschenbach, Frongillo, & Kendall, 1996; Derrickson, Anderson, & Fisher, 2000). While we need to be cautious because sample sizes are often small, from these studies we find that the percentage of pantry users classified as food insecure ranged from a low of 56 percent of the 135 pantry users in a low-income sample from the greater Pittsburgh area (Daponte, 1996), to 72 percent (41 out of the 57 pantry users in the study) in an upstate New York sample of mothers with children at home (Olson, Rauschenbach, Frongillo, & Kendall, 1996), to a high of 76 percent (114 out of 151 pantry users) in a Hawaiian community sample (Derrickson, Anderson & Fisher, 2000). In Second Harvest's most recent survey, just over 71 percent of surveyed pantry users measured as food insecure (Second Harvest, 2001). The 2000 CPS survey found that approximately 75 percent of sampled households who reported using a food pantry during the previous 12 months were classified as food insecure (Nord, et al, p. 30).

The Research

Method

This study used cross-sectional data that had been collected annually since 1997 from program participants in randomly selected food pantry and soup kitchen sites affiliated with one of the seven Virginia food bank regions. Multistage cluster sampling was used to first select a sample of

sites and then a sample of clients at each site. The first stage of sampling involved the seven regional food banks producing an enumerated list of all food pantries and soup kitchens in their regions in 1997 (N= 2000). Next, a stratified random sample of medium to large food pantries and soup kitchens (defined as those which generally serve a minimum of 15 clients during each food distribution period) was taken within each of the seven regional food bank areas of the state. The researchers randomly selected nine of the medium to large food pantries, and one soup kitchen in each of the seven regional areas. This ratio of pantries to soup kitchens is based on food bank directors' estimates that approximately 90 percent or more of the total population served goes to food pantries and the remaining ten percent go to soup kitchens. Additional food pantries and soup kitchens in each region were randomly selected as replacement sites in the event that a site had closed prior to data collection or refused to participate when initially contacted. The 1997 sites were contacted again in subsequent years with randomly selected replacement sites being used as needed for those that were either closed or unwilling to participate.

A fixed response interview served as the data collection instrument for participants selected at each food site. Information, such as names or addresses that could expose individual-specific responses, was not available to the researchers, assuring participant anonymity. The survey asked participants descriptive information about the total number in the household, number of children under age 18, respondent's age, age of youngest child, and single parent status. Descriptive information also included the participant's educational level, citizenship, and racial or ethnic identification, as well as information on the participant's employment status (held a job; usual hours of work per week; typical hourly salary) within the past six months and at the time of the survey. Employment status items were expanded after the 1997 survey, adding questions about the employment of the spouse or other adult in the household, and the disability status of the

participant, and household income questions were added after the 1998 survey. Survey participants also responded to a series of items addressing receipt of food stamps, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), as well as about the recent loss of public benefits and other hardships they may have experienced in the previous six months. In the 2001, the 18 item core food security module was added to the survey.

The regional food bank directors were asked to coordinate with the selected sites in their region to administer the survey to 15 individuals who came to the site during one day in November or December. They were asked to do the data collection on only one day to preclude the possibility of interviewing the same recipient more than one time. The food bank director was provided with enough surveys for the 10 sites in their region, along with detailed instruction sheets for administering the survey. The instructions specified that larger sites were to randomly select individuals at regular intervals (e.g., every 5th person), and the smaller sites were to select respondents as they walked into the site until a total of 15 surveys were completed, or the site closed for the day. Staff from the regional food banks or staff from the selected sites administered the surveys.² Although all food bank regions initially agreed to participate in the study, each year there were staffing issues in some of the food banks and/or local sites that resulted in non-response from a site, or less than 15 completed surveys in some of the sites because of few pantry/soup kitchen clients on the day the survey was administered. In 1997, 55 sites responded, submitting a total of 764 useable surveys. In 1998, 50 sites responded, submitting a total of 736 surveys, in 1999, 55 sites responded with a total of 681 surveys, and in 2001, 48 sites responded with a total of 609 surveys, resulting in a total sample size of 2790 respondents for the four years of data collection.

Findings

Demographics of sample

Although our sample is restricted to respondents in the state of Virginia, an examination of characteristics of the 1997 and 2001 Virginia sample and those that are available from Second Harvest's 1997 and 2001 national study of food assistance sites provides some comparative information. These data, shown in Table 1, indicate that overall there are not large differences in the characteristics of the two samples of food pantry and soup kitchen users. The most notable differences are in the percentage of African-Americans, Latinos and elderly, with the Virginia sample having a substantially greater percentage of African-Americans than the Second Harvest sample in both years (43.7 percent compared to 31 percent in 1997, and 46.6 percent compared to Second Harvest's 35.1 percent). The Virginia sample also has fewer Latino (2.2 percent compared to 16.0 percent in 1997; 7.2 percent compared to 20 percent in 2001) and elderly sample members (7.2 percent compared to 14.7 percent in 1997; and 12.8 percent compared to 20.4 percent in 2001) compared to the Second Harvest sample.

Table 1:
 Characteristics of food pantry and soup kitchen users in Virginia and the U. S., 1997 and 2001

Characteristic	1997 Virginia Sample <u>n</u> = 764	1997 Second Harvest Client Data <u>n</u> = 23,492	2001 Virginia Sample <u>n</u> = 609	2001 Second Harvest Client Data <u>n</u> = 29,877
Female respondents	70.4%	63.5%	72.0%	62%
Percentage of all sample HH that are single parent	32.5%	24.1%	26.7%	23.2%
Percentage of all HH with children that are single parent	57.4%	52.6%	59.1%	50.5%
Education				
Less than H.S.	47.2%	40.0%	47.3%	37.2%
High school	37.2%	35.6%	33.6%	39.6%
Greater than H.S.	15.6%	24.4%	19.1%	23.2%
Race/ethnicity				
African American	43.7%	31%	46.6%	35.1%
White, non-Hispanic	48.3%	47%	39.9%	44.9%
Hispanic/Latino	2.2%	16%	7.2%	20%
Respondents over age 65	7.2%	14.7%	12.8%	20.4%
Respondents employed	28.5%	20.4%	20.1%	25.2%
HH receiving TANF	12.0%		5.7%	5.9%
HH receiving foodstamps	37.0%	40.7%	33.5%	29.7%
% Food insecure	NA	NA	82.5%	70.9%

Interestingly, the percentage of elderly and Hispanic/Latino clients has increased in both samples, indicating that these groups are becoming a greater proportion of food pantry clients. Paralleling national trends in welfare and food stamp use, the percentage of TANF and food stamp recipients in these samples of food pantry and soup kitchen users also decreased between 1997 and 2001. A substantial majority of respondents in both surveys reported being food insecure (82.5% of the Virginia respondents, and 70.9% of the Second Harvest respondents).

The following table of *food pantry users* only, presents data on the change over time in those currently on TANF and food stamps, and those who have recently lost those benefits. As predicted, pantries have seen a steady decline in the percentage of their clients who are current TANF recipients, and an increase in the percentage of those who recently left TANF (Table 2) . A similar trend is evidenced for food stamp recipients who attend pantries, although the percentage change is not as large.

Table 2: Change in TANF and food stamp status among food pantry users in Virginia across years.

	1997 N = 704	1998 N = 655	1999 N = 596	2001 N = 557
% Currently on TANF	13.5%	8.1%	7.0%	5.8%
% Lost TANF in last 6 months	1%	6.3%	8.7%	5.7%
% Currently on food stamps	38.0%	38.8%	34.2%	35.0%
% Lost food stamps in last 6 months	11.8%	11.5%	14.6%	16.0%

Families with Children

Table 3 presents information about change over time in the characteristics of Virginia families with children. This table, and all subsequent tables, limit the sample to families with children who sought assistance at food pantries. Although most household characteristics are quite consistent across years, there are significant differences in the race/ethnicity of the sample and, paralleling Table 2, in the percentage of families with children on foodstamps and TANF. The percentage of Hispanic/Latino families are significantly higher in 2001 than in 1997, and the percentage of respondents on food stamps and TANF has decreased during this time.

TANF and food stamp status of families

In Table 4, families with children are categorized by TANF status and food stamp status for each of the sample years. It appears that after a somewhat substantial and significant drop between 1997 and 1998 in the percentage of current TANF families among our sample of food pantry users – and a concomitant increase in the percentage who recently lost TANF – the percentages across TANF status categories have remained relatively stable. In 1998, 1999 and 2001, about 12 to 13 percent of families in our sample were currently on TANF and approximately, 11 to 12 percent had lost TANF in the last six months. The distribution of families with children across food stamp statuses, however, shows the most significant drop in families currently on foodstamps in 1999, with the decline continuing into 2001. Data (shown in Table 6) indicate that almost 36 percent of those who stated they had lost TANF in the last six months, also indicated they had lost food stamps in the last six months.

Table 3: Characteristics of food pantry families with children in Virginia across years

Characteristics	1997 N = 415	1998 N = 377	1999 N = 345	2001 N = 266
% Female respondents	82.3%	80.5%	86.6%	83.7%
Number in household	4.29	4.16	4.35	4.15
% Respondent disabled ¹	Not Available	14.6%	14.8%	15.0%
# children < 18	2.46	2.41	2.41	2.31
Age youngest child	6.2 years	6.4 years	7.8 years	6.8 years
% Single Parent HH	58.6%	60.3.9%	56.7%	58.3%
Education				
% with < HS	45.5%	51.2%	41.9%	39.2%
Race/Ethnicity				
% African-American	43.5%	48.8%	39.8%	45.0%
% White, Non-Hispanic	49.3%	45.8%	47.6%	35.9%*
% Hispanic/Latino	2.2%	3.0%	6.9%	12.6%*
% Respondent employed	33.3%	27.%	34.2%	28.9%
% With another current wage earner	Not Available	15.6%	21.7%	22.2%
% Currently on food stamps	41.9%	42.3%	34.8%	29.9%*
% Currently on TANF	21.4%	13.6%	11.6%	11.9%*

* significantly different than 1997 (p< .05)

¹ Defined as those who reported being disabled and receiving some type of disability benefits (e.g., SSI, Veterans Disability benefits, etc.).

Table 4:
TANF and Food Stamp status of food pantry families with children, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001

STATUS	1997 N = 415	1998 N = 376	1999 N = 345	2001 N = 252
Currently on TANF	21.4%	13.6%*	11.6%	11.9%
Recent TANF ¹	1.4%	9.0%*	12.2%	11.1%
Not current or recent TANF ²	77.1%	77.4%	76.2%	77.0%
Currently on food stamps	41.9%	42.3%	34.8%*	29.9%
Recent food stamps ³	13.7%	10.9%	17.7%*	19.9%
Not current or recent food stamps ⁴	44.4%	46.8%	47.5%	50.2%

* change between this year and previous year is significant (p < .01)

¹ Lost TANF w/in last 6 months

² Off TANF more than 6 months or never on TANF

³ Lost food stamps w/in last 6 months

⁴ Off food stamps more than 6 months or never on TANF

Table 5 presents sample characteristics for food pantry families across all years by TANF status. We were particularly interested in how those who left TANF within the last six months (Recent TANF) compared to the other two groups. As can be seen, there are very few statistically significant differences between the groups. Compared to those currently on TANF, those who left TANF within six months of the survey date were less likely to be single parents, more likely to be employed and much less likely to be receiving foodstamps. Compared to those not current or recent TANF recipients, those who had recently left TANF were more likely to be single parents, and to have more and younger children.

Hardships experienced by families

In addition to the need to seek food assistance, many households experienced other problems, which we have labeled as *hardships*. Table 6 describes the responses among families with children when respondents were asked to indicate if they had experienced a range of hardships during the six months immediately before the survey. Respondents were asked to check all that applied to them. These hardships illustrate the vulnerability of these families. Because there is a particular interest in knowing how former TANF recipients fare after leaving TANF, the data have been presented by TANF and food stamp status groups. Those that have lost TANF or food stamps within the last six months have been classified as “Recent TANF” or “Recent food stamps.” These two groups form the comparison group for statistical tests.

There are very few statistically significant differences between the TANF groups in their loss of housing stability, utility service or family stability. Former TANF recipients were less likely to have their phone service cut off, but as expected, this group of former TANF recipients appear to be more economically vulnerable than either of the other two groups.

Table 5: Characteristics of food pantry families with children by TANF status, all sample years (1997, 1998, 1999 and 2001)

Characteristics	Current TANF N = 210	Recent TANF N = 110	Not Current or Recent TANF N = 1064
% Single parent household	78.8%*	67.9%	53.8%*
Number in household	4.31	4.45	4.20
# Children < 18	2.77	2.62	2.31*
Age youngest child	5.5 years	5.9 years	7.1 years*
Education			
% with < HS	51.7%	48.6%	43.7%
Race/Ethnicity			
% African-American	53.6%	49.1%	42.0%
% White, Non-Hispanic	40.1%	40.7%	47.1%
% Hispanic/Latino	2.4%	4.6%	6.3%
% Respondent employed	21.6%*	33.6%	32.5%
% Currently on food stamps	81.3%*	31.8%	30.9%

*significantly different than Recent TANF

Table 6: Hardships experienced by pantry families with children within six months of survey, by TANF and food stamp status (all sample years, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001)

Hardship Experienced	Current TANF N = 208	Recent TANF N = 110	Not current or recent TANF N = 1064	Current food stamps N = 522	Recent food stamps N = 207	Not current or recent food stamps N = 638
Loss of housing stability						
homeless	8.7%	6.4%	7.2%	6.1%*	11.6%	7.1%*
had to move	13.5%	8.2%	10.7%	11.5%	14.5%	9.2%*
took in tenants	8.7%	7.3%	11.5%	9.8%	11.6%	10.8%
Loss of utility service						
heat/electricity cut off	20.2%	14.5%	13.2%	18.6%*	12.6%	11.4%
phone service cut off	37.0%*	25.5%	22.7%	29.7%	27.5%	20.1%*
Loss of family stability						
victim of domestic violence	16.8%	9.1%	8.4%	12.1%	10.6%	7.5%
children spent time away or placed in foster care	4.8%	7.3%	4.4%	4.0%	6.8%	4.7%
Loss of economic stability						
lost job	22.1%	25.7%	21.3%	20.8%	24.5%	21.6%
lost medicaid/hlth insurance	6.3%*	17.3%	13.6%	9.8%*	22.7%	11.8%*
lost TANF				8.2%*	19.1%	3.7%*
lost foodstamps	9.2%*	35.6%	8.9%*			
had to skip a meal ¹	35.3%	37.5%	30.8%	34.4%	33.3%	29.3%

¹ only for 1998, 1999 and 2001

Particularly striking is the percentage that have lost food stamps. Over 35 percent of those who have recently left TANF have lost their food stamps within the last six months, compared to approximately nine percent among the other two groups of respondents.

A pattern of economic vulnerability also exists among the recent food stamp group. Those who have lost their food stamp benefits within the last six months are significantly more likely than current food stamp recipients to have been homeless, and more likely to have moved than those not currently or recently on food stamps. However, the greatest differences among groups, is in the area of economic stability. Just over 24 percent of recent food stamp families indicated that they had lost a job in the last six months, almost 23 percent had lost their health care coverage, 19 percent had recently lost TANF and over 33 percent had to skip a meal in the last six months.

As noted in Table 4, by 2001 just under 30 percent of families with children in our food pantry sample were currently receiving food stamps. Across all years the average percentage of families on foodstamps at the time of the survey was 38 percent, this figure is consistent with data from the 2000 CPS Food Security Supplement in which just under 40 percent of those who used a food pantry reporting that they had received food stamps in the previous 30 days (Nord et al., 2002). Although our data do not allow us to determine the reasons why households do or do not participate in the food stamp program, we can examine the likelihood that a family in our sample will be a current food stamp recipient.

Table 7 presents the results of a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of being a current food stamp recipient. The independent variables include household and respondent characteristics as well as the region and year. In addition to demographic variables, a hardship

variable was created that counted the number of hardships experienced by the family within the last six months. The hardships counted included all those listed in Table 5 except the loss of food stamps, the loss of TANF, with the number of hardships ranging from 0 - 9. The average number of hardships for families in the sample was 1.18.

Paralleling the descriptive data in Table 5, even when other variables are controlled, compared to current TANF recipients, those who have recently left TANF and those who have not been on TANF within the last six months, are significantly less likely to be current foodstamp recipients. Unfortunately, household income was not asked in the earlier years of the survey, but other significant demographic predictors suggest that those who are likely to be at most economic risk (i.e., the unemployed, single parents, those with younger children, and those with less than a high school education) are more likely to be current food stamp recipients than those not in these categories. The number of hardships experienced by the family does not have a significant influence on their likelihood of food stamp participation. One potentially troubling finding is that Hispanic/Latino respondents were significantly less likely to be food stamp recipients than white respondents.

Although it appears that those respondents most economically vulnerable were receiving food stamps at the time of the survey, it is of concern that less than half of these families receive this form of assistance. This coupled with the large percentage of those who responded that they had to skip a meal in the last six months, suggests a high level of food insecurity among food pantry families with children in our sample.

Table 7: Logistic Regression Predicting Current Food Stamp Program Participation Virginia Food Pantry Families with Children, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001 (N = 1193)

Variables in Equation	B	Std. Error	Exp (B)
Recent TANF	-2.19**	.21	.11
Not current or recent TANF	-2.37**	.31	.10
Currently employed	-.59**	.16	.55
# of hardships in last 6 months	.01	.05	1.01
Number in household	-.01	.04	.99
Single parent family	.64**	.15	1.89
Age of youngest child	-.03*	.02	.97
Less than high school	.47**	.15	1.60
African-American ³	-.28	.17	.76
Hispanic/Latino ³	-.98*	.44	.37
Other race/ethnicity ³	-.52	.38	.59
1998 respondent ²	.28	.19	1.33
1999 respondent ²	.53**	.21	1.70
2001 respondent ²	-.17	.21	.85
Blueridge ⁴	.99**	.27	2.69
Southwest ⁴	.80**	.27	2.24
Norfolk ⁴	1.03**	.30	2.79
Fredericksburg ⁴	.26	.32	1.30
Richmond ⁴	.02	.28	1.02
Penninsula ⁴	.79**	.28	2.21
Constant	-1.68**	.37	.19
-2 X (log likelihood) 1284.07		df = 20	

¹ compared to currently on TANF; ² compared to 1997 respondents; ³ compared to white;

⁴ compared to the Northern Virginia region

* significant at p<.05 ** significant at p<.01

Food insecurity

To examine more closely the issue of food security, the 2001 survey respondents were asked to respond to the USDA Core Food Security Module (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton & Cook, 2000). The measurement of food security is based on survey responses to a series of 18 questions about the household's ability to meet their food needs. It includes such questions as "We worried about whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more;" and "In the last 12 months were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because you couldn't afford enough food?" Ten questions are asked about the respondent or other adults in the household, and an additional eight questions are asked specifically about children in the household (e.g. We relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the children because we were running out of money to buy food.). Households receive a food security "scale-score" based on their responses to the various questions. Households with low scores are those who report no – or very few – affirmative responses to experiencing food insecurity or hunger. Those with the highest scores are those who report a large number of food-insecurity experiences. In this sample of families with children, 13 respondents (5.5%) had a score of zero, indicating no experiences with food insecurity, whereas only one respondent answered affirmatively to all food insecurity questions. The scale-score also allows for classification of households into one of three categories: food secure, food insecure without hunger, and food insecure with hunger (Bickel, et al., 2000). Overall in this sample of families with children, just over 14% of the respondents were classified as food secure, 40% were classified as food insecure without hunger, and almost 46% were classified as food insecure with hunger. Table 8 presents the food security status of TANF and food stamp households by reciprocity status. Only those who answered all the food security questions were included in the analysis.

Table 8:
Food security status by TANF and Food Stamp status of food pantry families with children in Virginia, 2001

STATUS	Food secure	Food insecure without hunger	Food insecure with hunger
Currently on TANF (\underline{n} = 27)	7.4%	33.3%	59.3%
Recent TANF (\underline{n} = 27)	11.1%	63.0%	25.9%
Not current or recent TANF (\underline{n} = 173)	16.2%	39.3%	44.5%
Currently on food stamps (\underline{n} = 63)	12.3%	36.5%	50.8%
Recent food stamps (\underline{n} = 45)	6.7%	46.7%	46.7%
Not current or recent food stamps (\underline{n} = 116)	19.8%	41.4%	38.8%

Although the numbers in some groups are small, the data in Table 8 provide insights as to the “protection” against food insecurity these programs do or do not provide. As can be seen by comparing across rows, those who lost TANF in the six months prior to the survey were much more likely to be food insecure without hunger than either of the other two TANF groups, but much less likely to be food insecure with hunger. Being on food stamps does not seem to provide much protection against food insecurity. Only about 12 percent of families with children who are current food stamp recipients are food secure. This is consistent with findings from the CPS food security survey (Nord, 2001), in which the author concludes that “this reflects the propensity of households that feel in need of food to apply for food stamps” (p. 18). Clearly, food insecurity, with and without hunger, is exceedingly high for those who seek services at food pantries in Virginia.

A regression model using the continuous 18-item food security scale-score as the dependent variable (Bickel, et al, 2000), and household and sample characteristics as the independent variables was used to examine the predictors of a family’s food security status (Table 9). The food security scale value can range from a low of zero (food secure) to a high of 9.3, indicating the most severe level of food insecurity. Given the scoring from low (secure) to high (insecure), a positive coefficient will mean an increase in the likelihood or severity of food insecurity, whereas a negative coefficient will mean a decrease in the likelihood or severity of food insecurity.

Included in the independent variables are the TANF and foodstamp status categories, employment status, monthly household income, the hardship measure and characteristics of the respondent and his/her household. Approximately 15% of the 2001 sample of families with

children did not answer the income question, therefore to maximize sample size, mean value substitution was used for those households with missing information on income. To control for potential unmeasured differences between those who responded to the income question and those who did not, a dummy variable for missing income was created. A value of one (1) was assigned to households with missing income, and a zero (0) to other households.

The regression results indicate that neither TANF or foodstamp status have a significant effect on food security. Thus, when income and family characteristics are controlled, whether or not a family receives TANF or foodstamps does not affect their food security status. As expected, the higher the family income, the lower their risk for food insecurity. And, not surprisingly, those families who experience a greater number of other hardships have a greater likelihood of food insecurity. Interesting, when other household characteristics are controlled, minority families are less food *insecure* than their white counterparts.

Discussion

Although food pantries and soup kitchens may be considered by many as a place to turn for help in an “emergency” situation, it is evident from both the Virginia and Second Harvest studies that most individuals who seek services at these sites have characteristics that do not bode well for their being able to adequately meet basic family needs in the *long-term* without some type of additional supports. For families with children in Virginia, these characteristics – which have not changed appreciably over the last five years – indicate that a large percentage of pantry users include the disabled, single parents, and those who have less than a high school education.

Table 9: Regression Predicting Food Security Scale-Score, Virginia Food Pantry Families with Children, 2001 (N = 207)

Variables in Equation	B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta
Recent TANF ¹	-.69	.57	-.12
Not current or recent TANF	-.69	.48	-.16
Recent food stamps ²	.02	.44	.01
Not current or recent food stamps ²	-.58	.37	-.15
Currently employed	.49	.31	.12
Monthly HH income	-.001 *	.00	-.19
Missing income	-.06	.42	-.01
Number of hardships in last 6 months	.38 **	.11	.25
Number in household	.05	.08	.05
Single parent family	-.39	.29	-.13
Age of youngest child	.03	.03	.07
Less than high school	.33	.27	.08
African-American ³	-.62 *	.30	-.16
Other race/ethnicity ³	-1.09 **	.39	-.23
Constant	5.15 **	.71	

R² = .17

¹ compared to currently on TANF ; ² compared to currently on food stamps; ³ compared to white

* significant at p<.05 ** significant at p<.01

There is some indication for our findings that a majority of the recipient households have been depending on these so-called emergency programs as a regular source of food. When asked how often they seek services at a food pantry, approximately 50 percent of the 2001 Virginia sample of families with children indicated they came at least once a month, and, 47 percent view the pantry as a regular source of food, rather than as a place they come for assistance because they are experiencing a short-term emergency. These numbers are even higher among working families, and those who recently left food stamps. Among working families over 56% responded that they use the pantry as a regular source of food, and, over 61% of those who recently left foodstamps use it in that manner. Approximately 32% of those who recently left TANF responded that food pantries are a regular source of food for their families.

As anticipated, the percentage of families in the Virginia sample who are currently on TANF has decreased over time, and those who have recently lost TANF has increased. While the numbers are certainly not as dramatic as caseload declines, this parallels the declining numbers of Virginia families on TANF. According to data compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002), between 1996 and 2001, the number of Virginia families on TANF declined by almost 53 percent.

There has also been a significant decline in families with children who are on food stamps. The Food Stamp Program is designed to assist low-income families meet their food needs, however for a significant proportion of our sample, it does not appear to achieve that goal. By 2001, approximately 70 percent of families with children in our sample were *not* currently receiving food stamps, up from the 58 percent who were not participating in the food stamp program at the time of the 1997 survey. This again, follows national and state food stamp program caseload trends. Nationally the average number of households participating monthly in the food stamp program

declined by 21 percent between 1997 and 2001, and in Virginia the decline was just over 27 percent (Food and Nutrition Service, 2002).

Recent national studies of food stamp participation rates have attributed much of the decline in caseloads to a strong economy, and food stamp and TANF policy changes (Kornfeld, 2002). However, there is also evidence that the decline in the number of food stamp recipients *exceeds* the decline in the number of people potentially eligible for food stamps (Nord, 2001; Parrott & Dean, 1999). In addition, studies show that while the majority of TANF families receive food stamp benefits, a substantial portion of former TANF families no longer receive these benefits despite the fact that many remain eligible (Garrett et al., 2000; Guyer, J., 2000; Loprest., 1999; Mills, et al., 2001). A Virginia study of TANF families whose cases were closed, found that just over 62 percent of former TANF families were on food stamps 18 months after case closure, although many families remained poor enough to be eligible (Gordon, et al., 2002).

In our 2001 survey we asked non-food stamp respondents why they were not on food stamps. Among families with children, approximately 48 percent thought they would not be eligible, whereas almost 15 percent indicated that the application process was too long (4.2 percent), or they believed their benefits would be too small to put up with the hassle (10.5 percent). This may be an indication that many individuals are using private food assistance services as an alternative to the challenges of FSP application and to the restrictions placed on this program. Previous studies of food stamp participation rates have found that the administrative complexity of the program in relation to the benefits derived influence the likelihood that an eligible individual will make application (Eisinger, 1998). Most food pantries, unlike the food stamp program, do not have income requirements that determine whether a family will be eligible to obtain a free market basket of food, nor do they use income to determine the amount of food the family receives.

Interestingly, another 19 percent noted that they just did not want to apply (11.6%) or they didn't want to take government handouts (7.4%).

Our findings also indicate that TANF and food stamp households who seek services at food pantries are struggling to meet needs beyond those for food. Several of the hardship questions in our survey were designed to assess other economic problems facing these households. Although personal or household income has been the traditional indicator of economic well-being, there has been increasing interest among researchers in using other measures of well-being. This interest has been fueled by the 1996 welfare reform legislation which established strong work requirements for TANF recipients, raising new concerns about accurately assessing the well-being of families (Garfinkel, 1999). Although highly correlated, it has become evident that an annual income poverty measure does not capture an accurate picture of economic well-being and the struggles families face to meet basic needs (Bauman, 1998; Meyers and Garfinkel, 1999).

Given the range of hardships experienced by respondents in our sample, it is not surprising that almost three-quarters of food pantry respondents reported spending less on groceries during the week they get food at the pantry – money they diverted to other household expenses. This, in spite of the fact that almost 86 percent of food pantry households in the survey reported being food insecure. In fact, among those who reported being food insecure with hunger, a full 71% stated they spent less money on food when they came to the pantry.

Food insecurity appears to be a fact of life for the majority of food pantry families with children in this Virginia sample. And, it appears that our Virginia food pantry families are less likely to be food secure than comparable families nationally. Results from the Second Harvest survey reported that approximately 76% of their pantry households with children were classified as food insecure, compared to the 86% in the Virginia sample. In addition, an examination of the

income of these Virginia households in the 2001 survey is a clear indicator that they are extremely economically disadvantaged. Their average monthly income was \$784 with an average household size of just over four members. In 2001, the poverty threshold for a family of four was \$17,650, putting these families well below the poverty line.

Conclusions & Policy Implications

Many families have come to depend on food pantries, in part, to help make ends meet. The free bag of food helps to offset other household expenses. Yet, even with this food assistance, most people find themselves unable to pay all of their bills. And, despite the availability of private and public food assistance programs, food insecurity continues to be a significant issue for many households in Virginia.

Although welfare reform discussions have often focused on diverting individuals from the public sector and into the private sector for meeting the short term needs of families, this may not be the a very effective means for reducing food insecurity among poor families. Findings from the CPS food security survey (Nord, et al., 2002) indicate that a large percentage of food-insecure households did not have such a resource in their community (p. 30). In addition, in our annual survey of Virginia pantries we found that many of the small neighborhood providers were no longer in operation in the following year, making the dependability of this resource problematic. It was also evident that in most sites the hours and days of operation were very limited (e.g., the 2nd and 4th Wednesday of the month from 9:00 - noon), making accessibility an issue for families who are unable to meet this schedule.

One of the logical public supports for this population, of course, is food stamps. Caution needs to be exercised in drawing conclusions from the available income data, but the average reported income for families not on food stamps (\$850/month) is well below the limit for food

stamp eligibility for a family of four (\$1,913/month gross income). Many of these families do not believe they are eligible, suggesting that more rigorous outreach is necessary. Food pantries may, in fact, be one location that would prove particularly fruitful as outreach sites given the obvious food needs of the population and their relatively low levels of participation in the food stamp program.

Given the devastating effects of food insecurity on the health of individuals, and most particularly on children (see Center on Hunger & Poverty, 2002), policies that directly address the food needs of families, and those that assist families such that they can achieve the economic means to meet the range of their household needs are critically important. The food security regression analysis clearly indicates the relationship between household income and food security. A recent report on a “Self-Sufficiency Standard for Virginia,” determined that a family of three would need to earn approximate \$2,876 per month to meet its household expenses without any work supports (Action Alliance for Virginia’s Children, 2002) – that is over 3.5 times the average monthly income of our pantry households. It is evident that a combination of programs and policies focused on employment, education and training, as well as supports such as transportation, child care, and health care are necessary components for assisting this population. Private food assistance may be able to play a role in this array of programs, but its ability to address the needs of this particularly needy population is limited.

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1. TEFAP was originally instituted (under a different name) in 1981 as a temporary measure to distribute surplus cheese to individuals. It was expanded in 1983 to include distribution of a broader range of commodity goods and re-named the temporary emergency food assistance program. While expected to end in six months. TEFAP was extended and reauthorized, until 1990 when it lost its “temporary” title and merged with the already existing food distribution program to soup kitchens and food banks. TEFAP (which kept its original acronym even after losing the word temporary in its title) distributes USDA donated and purchased commodities to food pantries and soup kitchens, as well as funding to nonprofit organizations to help defray costs of food distribution (Eisinger, 1998).
 2. Although the large number of different individuals administering the survey has the potential for introducing data collection reliability issues and possible bias, each site was provided with an explicit guide for administration, and the survey instrument had only closed ended questions.