

## **A Portrait of Hunger, the Social Safety Net, and the Working Poor**

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*In a study at the largest northeastern Iowa food pantry between 2004 and 2006, we found that neither working nor accessing government benefits has a meaningful impact on lessening the odds that a person will need long-term food assistance. In other words, the working poor are at greater risk for making recurrent visits to the food pantry than those who do not work. Pantry clients who work are more likely to have sacrificed food to pay for other life necessities. Moreover, government benefits do not seem to provide an adequate food safety net. As a result, nonprofits are experiencing increased pressure to fill the gap. If we wish to maintain the government responsibility to alleviate hunger in our country, benefits for eligible citizens must be increased or food assistance nonprofits need more government support. Otherwise we should face the fact that as an undeclared public policy, our society tolerates hunger.*

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**KEY WORDS:** food assistance, food insecurity, hunger

### **Introduction**

Each year, millions of Americans turn to the Food Stamp Program to feed themselves and their families. Yet the existence of soup kitchens and other hunger relief services demonstrate that food stamps are insufficient to meet national food needs. Increasingly, nonprofit organizations are asked to fill gaps that the government is unable or unwilling to close (Alexander, 1999). Given our federally supported social safety net, why is there such a growing need for nonprofits to step in and feed the hungry? Why do people need donated food? A first step in answering this question is to understand the motivations of those who need food assistance. Do they use food assistance only in an emergency, or does food assistance supplement their normal food supply? Do they work? Do they receive government support? Why did they start to use food assistance? To begin answering these questions, this article will present the comprehensive results of a recent two-year survey of a food pantry's population, creating a portrait of the people who rely on nonprofit food assistance.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study is to use the survey information to present a tangible portrait of those using nonprofit food pantry services. We have three specific

research questions. The first set of analyses provide descriptions of food pantry clients in terms of how long they need assistance, employment status, and whether they received government benefits. Next we turn to understanding why they seek assistance. Finally, we consider how these and other factors influence whether a person is a short- or long-term nonprofit food pantry client.

To address an issue as comprehensive as hunger, systemic policy solutions must be developed (Brown, Shepard, Martin, & Orwat, 2007). However, before policy-makers can determine a course of action, they require basic information to shape and inform discussion. This study is an attempt to do that—an attempt to provide a portrait of hunger.

### Background

Though many Americans feel the effects of hunger and food insecurity each year, determining exactly how many people go hungry is challenging. As previous studies have shown, gathering valid and reliable data on this population is extremely difficult. Since the first estimates were made in 1967, the number has been consistently adjusted higher, never lower. For the past 10 years the number has grown at a steady but slow rate so that the current estimate is that at least 12 percent of the U.S. population, or 35 million individuals, are not being adequately fed (Brown et al., 2007).

Hunger drives people to use both government and nonprofit food assistance programs. Participation in federally funded food assistance programs decreased between the mid-1990s and 2000 (Berner & O'Brien, 2004). There is some evidence that these decreases were a part of welfare reform as well as policies specifically designed to reduce food stamp rolls (Zedlewski & Brauner, 1999). However, at the same time that the number of people accessing government aid decreased, the numbers seeking help from community agencies and nonprofit organizations operating soup kitchens and food pantries rose substantially (Berner & O'Brien, 2004).

From 1995 to 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) used three constructs to describe hunger: food secure, food insecure without hunger, and food insecure with hunger (Bartfield & Dunifon, 2006). In 2006, at the recommendation of the Committee on National Statistics of the National Academies, the USDA introduced new terminology to describe food security and food insecurity (USDA, 2007). The new language divides "food security" into two categories: "high food security" and "marginal food security" and "food insecurity" into two new categories: "low food security" and "very low food security" (USDA, 2007). Our focus is on food insecurity, with or without hunger, or in the new USDA language, both low and very low food security. Food insecurity defines one type of hunger affecting a household in which family members are "at times, uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food" (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2005, p. 6). Families experiencing food insecurity with hunger report "multiple indications of reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to inadequate resources for food" (Nord et al., 2005, p. 4).

Food insecurity is a growing problem. The release of the annual Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) report in October 2005 depicts a five-year upward trend, ending with 2004 data showing a large increase in the number of households suffering from hunger and without the ability to alleviate it (FRAC, 2005). According to the USDA, Americans living in food-insecure households in 2004 included 24.3 million adults and 13.9 million children (Nord et al., 2005). This number represents an increase from 2003 of nearly two million households (FRAC, 2005).

The USDA's annual food security survey supports these estimates. In 2003, only 4.9 percent of households falling at or above 185 percent of the federal poverty line experienced food insecurity, while 35.1 percent who are 100 percent below the federal poverty line were food insecure (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004, p. 9). By 2006, these figures had risen. While 5.3 percent of households at or above 185 percent of the federal poverty line and 36.3 percent of households below 100 percent of the federal poverty line were food insecure (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2007, p. 10). Food insecurity does not reach negligible levels until household income is more than five times the poverty threshold (Bartfield & Dunifon, 2006).

Experiencing food insecurity is a great hardship, but some people are faced with a worse situation. Of those 38.2 million food-insecure individuals, a third experienced food insecurity with hunger, or very low food security.

So what do people do when they need help? Several alternatives are available, each with its own hurdles and levels of support. The two main options are government assistance and nonprofit, private emergency food assistance.

In partnership with the federal government, states offer various forms of support, including the Food Stamp Program; the Women, Infants and Children Program; school meals programs; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; the Elderly Nutrition Program; and Food Assistance for Disaster Relief. In addition, several food distribution programs, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), exist to distribute food to larger organizations, such as schools and food pantries. Families may also choose to use resources from other financial assistance programs, such as social security and other state welfare programs, to buy food.

The Food Stamp Program is one of the most common sources of government food assistance. The program gives money to be used exclusively for food to needy individuals and families. Other government programs are available if individuals apply to and qualify for them. The Family Investment Program (FIP), for example, is Iowa's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. Both FIP in Iowa and TANF in other states provide cash assistance to indigent families with children for a limited number of years and are commonly referred to as welfare. The term welfare will be used for the remainder of this article, though unless otherwise noted we are referring to the FIP program in Iowa.

There is growing evidence that food stamp recipients are not finding government assistance sufficient to meet the needs of their households. Comparing Current Population Survey results from 2001 to 2002, Nord and Wilde found that for the most part, household food security status remained unchanged. Food stamps did not tend to alleviate a situation of food insecurity but rather, for households that entered the

Food Stamp Program between 2001 and 2002, “food security status more commonly deteriorated (20.9 percent) and less commonly improved (14.4 percent) during that year” (Nord & Wilde, 2005, pp. 428–29).

As a result of this gap, food stamp recipients are turning to emergency food providers in the private, nonprofit sector to supplement their needs (Daponte, 2000; Eisinger, 1999). The term emergency food provider encompasses a broad range of community organizations, including food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. According to America’s Second Harvest (A2H), an umbrella organization of food banks and food rescue organizations, 25 million Americans turned to charities for food assistance in 2004 (A2H, 2006).

Food banks warehouse, sort, and distribute groceries to a network of partners. They are able to organize large-scale food drives, receive donations from private-sector food producers such as local cereal or paper product factories, and use large numbers of volunteers in addition to paid staff. The food banks collect food donations and then allocate those resources to smaller organizations or member agencies, such as local food pantries, soup kitchens, daycare centers, or congregate meal programs, for subsequent distribution to individuals and families. If a member agency is charged, it is at a large discount compared to the private sector, and the fee is used to cover costs such as transportation and warehousing.

A food pantry is a private emergency food provider that gives bags or boxes of unprepared groceries to clients in varying amounts. The USDA reports 3.9 million households sought help from food pantries at least once during 2004. Yet the USDA acknowledges these figures may not be accurate since survey respondents tend to underreport use of food assistance programs (Nord et al., 2005). The pantry may distribute bags on a monthly or weekly basis or be open certain hours to allow clients to “shop” from the pantry shelves. A food pantry differs from a soup kitchen, which is more likely to serve freshly prepared meals to individuals as they come through the door.

The food going into pantry bags or soup kitchen meals comes from a variety of sources. In addition to a food bank, individuals, businesses, churches, local charities, or foundations may contribute either cash or in-kind donations of food to a pantry. Lastly, food pantries may apply to receive surplus commodities from the federal government through a food bank. The government distributes these commodities for purchase or for distribution through TEFAP. Through TEFAP, the USDA allocates funds to states to purchase surplus commodities. The states then distribute TEFAP commodities to organizations such as food banks. Each state can determine its own eligibility requirements for dispersal (FRAC, 2006a).<sup>2</sup>

This study concentrates on nonprofit food assistance provided by a large food pantry in northwest Iowa. Iowa is served by six food banks, which cover mutually exclusive service areas. The Northeast Iowa Food Bank in Waterloo, Iowa, distributes TEFAP and donated food to over 190 nonprofit member agencies in 16 northeastern Iowa counties.<sup>3</sup> The Northeast Iowa Food Bank operates the largest of these pantries, the Cedar Valley Food Pantry (CVFP), and the source of our data. The CVFP provides fruits, vegetables, pastas, cereals, and many other foods in food boxes. To be eligible to receive food boxes, CVFP clients must have an income at or below 185 percent of

federal income guidelines and provide verification of all household income, photo IDs, and social security cards for all household members.

The pantry distributes three types of food boxes: elderly food boxes, crisis or "emergency" food boxes, and supplemental food boxes. Elderly food boxes, given to senior centers and housing complexes weekly, represent only a small portion of the boxes the CVFP distributes. Thus our study focuses on emergency and supplemental food boxes.

For the first three events causing an individual to need CVFP services, he or she is considered an "emergency client." The majority of emergency clients are those who have recently experienced a crisis, such as losing a job, the death of a family member, or the loss of a home due to fire. Emergency clients may receive a food box from the pantry every week until they begin receiving food stamps. CVFP intake staff asks each client whether he or she is a recipient of food stamps. If not, the client is required to apply for food stamps and may receive a food box on a weekly basis until the application is processed. After three months, if the individual keeps returning for assistance, he or she becomes a "supplemental client." According to the CVFP, supplemental clients require support on a more regular basis, usually to repeatedly augment other sources of income or public assistance.

### Literature Review

So far there has been little research on defining who seeks help from food pantries or what might cause them to need this assistance on a long-term basis rather than only in an emergency. Many studies have examined the various forms of food assistance available from emergency food providers, including food pantries and soup kitchens. Yet few research studies focus on the characteristics of individuals using these resources.

However, understanding these characteristics is important. With the U.S. House of Representatives voting to cut the Food Stamp Program by \$2.8 billion in FY 2006–07, food assistance from pantries and soup kitchens may become even more essential.<sup>4</sup> Some even suggest the needy turn to food pantries before food stamps. Daponte and Bade found "that only 36 percent of households dependent on a food pantry receives food stamps and one third of pantry households have never even applied for FS suggests a fundamental shift in the needy's perception of the food safety net" (Daponte & Bade, 2006, pp. 668–69). To put this in a more tangible context, a study of three counties near Kansas City found that over three years, more than 13 percent of area households visited a pantry (Mosley & Tiehen, 2004). In fact, for many people, choosing between government and nonprofit food assistance is not an option. Both are needed. Mosley and Tiehen show some of the same people accessing food stamps also access food pantries. They conclude, "The data suggest that households are not substituting one form of assistance for the other but rather are accessing multiple types of assistance when necessary" (Mosley & Tiehen, 2004, p. 267).

Using data from the 1999 Current Population Survey to get a national sample, Bhattarai, Duffy, and Raymond also found that families do not use food pantries and food stamps as substitutes for each other. To the contrary, their bivariate probit

model showed “participating in one food assistance program increases the likelihood of participating in the other” (Bhattarai, Duffy, & Raymond, 2005, p. 295). This indicates the decline in the use of food stamps in the late 1990s was not due to the use of emergency food providers as a replacement form of food assistance.

One explanation for the lack of research on this topic is the difficulty of collecting valid and reliable data. While many food providers maintain data on the number of clients served, their methods for tracking clients differ widely. Food pantries or soup kitchens may track the number of individuals coming through the door, the number of families served, or the number of meals served in a year. Each provider may or may not ask for client names and keep records of how frequently an individual returns for assistance. Because of the lack of detail and consistency, in part due to the limited research capacity of these small nonprofits, there are few data to study.

One solution to the lack of detailed or consistent data is to survey recipients of food assistance. Profiles have been created in other studies, such as an analysis of single mothers and emergency food assistance in Wisconsin conducted by Bartfield in 2002 and low-income families in Iowa studied by Jensen, Keng, and Garasky in 2000. Among the variables included in these analyses are employment status and receipt of governmental aid including welfare, social security, and food stamps (Bartfield, 2002; Jensen, Keng, & Garasky, 2000). These studies provide the foundation on which our model is built.

Additionally, an extensive profile has been provided recently on the national level. The *Hunger in America 2006* report presented the findings of a national study conducted for A2H, the largest network of emergency food providers in the country. The A2H network covers all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The 2006 study involved interviews of 52,878 agency clients and surveys of 31,342 A2H agencies, both administered in 2005. Agencies included food pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency shelters serving short-term residents. The scope of the study is therefore quite vast (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2006).

While the extent of the *Hunger in America 2006* study is impressive, we are still missing the more detailed information and analyses that could be helpful to policymakers and practitioners working with low-income citizens. In contrast to the *Hunger in America 2006* study, this article focuses on one food pantry in Iowa to make the national information more accessible to a regional audience. In addition, while limited geographically, data available from the regional food pantry are more detailed and can confirm and extend the information included in the national study.

### Data and Methodology

The *Hunger in America 2006* study asked questions regarding clients' employment status, government support program participation status, and choices regarding paying for food versus other life necessities.<sup>5</sup> The CVFP has been asking similar questions plus more of its clients for several years.

All clients requesting assistance from the pantry were asked to complete a voluntary, two-page survey. Clients were asked to complete a survey each time they accessed food pantry services. The survey included closed-ended questions on

employment, housing, occurrence and type of crisis events, special dietary needs, and receipt of government-paid benefits including food stamps, welfare, and Social Security. The CVFP made the decision not to collect information on gender, race, age, ethnicity, family size, or income because the organization feels these types of questions have the potential to present a barrier for its clients. As such, no demographic information is available for this article.

While data collection by CVFP is continuing, only surveys collected between July 2004 and April 2006 are used here. The size of the CVFP data set is one of its strengths. The large sample size—2,031 usable surveys—allows a detailed examination of the characteristics of food pantry clients in Iowa and increases the generalizability of these findings to other populations.

However, because these are uneven panel data, the repeat clients have not been used to calculate descriptive statistics or in the logistic regression model. Personal traits such as veteran status, receipt of government benefits, or other demographic characteristics are likely to be invariant or to change slowly. Clients returning multiple times during the study period ( $N = 134$ ) were also less likely to complete the survey with each subsequent visit. Given that the response rate is low with repeat visits and the data are likely to be attenuated, these cases were removed from the analyses. This group represented only 6 percent of the sample. As a result, our sample size is reduced from 2,031 to 1,897.<sup>6</sup>

We conduct three main types of analyses: (i) descriptive statistics of the survey data to present a portrait of people using CVFP services; (ii) simple cross-tabulations to explore possible relationships in the data; and (iii) logistic regression modeling to explore these relationships simultaneously.

We first present the characteristics of clients accessing the CVFP. We then briefly move to cross-tabulations to explore relationships between working, receiving government benefits, and status at the pantry. Then, to better analyze how each of a number of variables affects pantry status, we move to regression analysis. Client status as emergency or supplemental is our dependent variable. Since this variable is dichotomous, we use a logistic regression model. Our model predicts client status (emergency or supplemental) by considering the effects of independent variables, including employment and receipt of government subsidies. If these factors can be isolated and understood, perhaps government programs and nonprofits can help clients avoid becoming food pantry regulars.

The sample used for this study is a nonrandom, convenience sample. All emergency and supplemental clients visiting the CVFP between January 2004 and December 2006 were asked to participate in the survey. Almost all emergency clients on the initial visit did (estimated to be about 99 percent); however, response rates with supplemental clients decreased with each additional visit. Response rates had to be estimated by CVFP staff because we did not have access to the actual client intake records to know the number of surveys distributed.

The equation used with logistic regression, like the one used with multiple regression, uses a linear combination of predictor variables. However, the difference is that because of the categorical nature of the dependent variable, the logistic regression model is used to find the odds of being in one of the categories of the

dependent variable given a particular combination of scores for the independent variables. Logistic regression allows for a robust examination of data, including possible interaction effects among the variables in order to predict the dependent variable (Garson, 2006).

To isolate the impacts of specific benefits programs, for example food stamps versus welfare, these variables were treated separately. No multicollinearity was found when variables for both receiving governmental benefits in general and receiving benefits in specific programs were included in the model. Dummy variables were used as necessary for the analysis. Because item nonresponse was an issue with several variables, a third group, the nonresponse clients, was created in some cases. There are some interesting findings with this group, and those are presented alongside the other categories when appropriate.

Binomial variables were used and coded so that the reference category is always the absence of a trait, characteristic, or condition. The independent variables in this model include client status, employment, and receipt of Social Security, food stamps, and welfare benefits. For the purpose of this survey, questions about employment imply that the respondent was actively employed at the time the instrument was administered.

As discussed in the limitations section that follows, the results of this study are constrained by having a nonrandom convenience sample. The nature and characteristics of the population of food pantry users makes random sample design impractical, cost prohibitive, and logistically impossible. We are unable to give each person that ever visited CVFP an equal chance of being included in the sampling frame, a requirement for a truly randomized sample draw. Yet due to similar client-based service provision, many other studies in a range of disciplines such as public health, medical science, and sociology have had to use similar sampling techniques (Bartfield, 2003; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Goodman & Blum, 1996).

One should also note that the CVFP estimates the population served in any month to be approximately two-thirds supplemental and one-third emergency; the result is that our sample has a stock and flow nature. Our survey captures the "flow" of clients as being more emergency than supplemental. Over time, as some portion of the emergency sample transition to supplemental status, the "stock" of the food pantry clients will lean more and more toward supplemental.

## Results

### *Differences between Emergency and Supplemental Clients*

Currently, CVFP supplemental and crisis food boxes combined reach an average of 1,100 households each month. Over time approximately two-thirds of all CVFP clients are both supplemental and have recorded multiple visits. However, responses to this survey indicated that 51 percent were first-time clients.

By definition, supplemental clients visit the pantry more frequently. Only about half of supplemental clients surveyed responded to the question asking them how frequently they came to the CVFP, suggesting some clients may not have been



**Table 1.** Frequency of Supplemental Clients' Visits to the Cedar Valley Food Pantry (Iowa, 2004–06)

Frequency of Visits	Number	Percent
1–2 times a year	219	69
3–4 times a year	46	15
5–6 times a year	18	6
7–8 times a year	12	4
9–10 times a year	8	3
More than 10 times a year	15	5
Total	318	102

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Totals do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

comfortable discussing their reliance on the pantry for food assistance. However, of those who did respond, 69 percent visited the CVFP one to two times a year. Another 15 percent of supplemental clients visited three to four times a year. Frequency of visits to the CVFP for all supplemental clients can be seen in Table 1.

During the two years in which surveys were gathered, approximately 10 percent of emergency clients transitioned into supplemental status. This is probably underestimated since we are not capturing those who became supplemental just after our survey data collection period ended. The pantry director (who also is the Northeast Iowa Food Bank Executive Director) viewed this finding with optimism, stating it shows the CVFP is meeting the immediate needs of the vast majority of people walking through its doors. On the negative side, an *additional* number of clients are constantly being added to the supplemental group, so the base of people dependent on the pantry for a long-term supplement to their food supply grows each year. This would only reverse if supplemental clients eventually stop needing assistance in a flow that meets or exceeds the number of “new” supplemental clients.

The reversal of client growth trends is unlikely. While fewer supplemental clients (54 percent) reported they had recently experienced a crisis of some sort than emergency respondents did (60 percent), the sheer number needing crisis intervention is substantial. The nature of each crisis varied and respondents could report experiencing more than one type of crisis. Nonetheless, as seen in Table 2, one type stood out more frequently than others: job loss. Twenty-nine percent of emergency clients said they had recently lost a job. Another 3 percent had experienced a fire at home, and 3 percent said a family member had recently passed away. The “other” category included another 40 percent of respondents. Commonly cited reasons in the other category were general financial hardship including loss of financial support from family or spouse (17 percent), health problems (7 percent), a change in domestic relationship, housing situation, or homelessness (7 percent), a recent move to the area (6 percent), and a recent release from prison (2 percent).

The crises these individuals faced would be familiar to any American, rich or poor. One individual reported the crisis was “a year of chemotherapy for daughter.” One individual reported that he or she “had shoulder surgery and will be out of work 4–6 weeks (income reduced by about 50 percent).” Another respondent cited

**Table 2.** Type of Crisis by Employment Status of Emergency Client CVFP (Iowa, 2004–06)

Type of Crisis	Employed		Unemployed		No Response	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Fire	10	3	28	3	1	3
Loss of job	56	15	342	34	5	13
Family death	9	2	28	3	0	0
Other	193	53	350	35	12	31
Total	268	73	748	75	18	47

Source: Author's calculations.

Note:  $N = 1,897$ . Totals do not equal 100 percent because clients could report experiencing more than one type of crisis. Supplemental clients were not asked about recent crises, as the CVFP considers them to have transitioned out of emergency status to a situation requiring long-term assistance. However, they were asked if they had experienced a crisis in the past. CVFP, Cedar Valley Food Pantry.

**Table 3.** Breakdown of Client Status by Employment Cedar Valley Food Panty (Iowa, 2004–06)

Status	Employed		Unemployed		No Answer	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Emergency	352	74	960	71	37	58
Supplemental	126	26	395	29	27	42
Total	478	100	1,355	100	64	100

Source: Authors' calculations.

Note:  $N = 1,897$ .

being “diagnosed with lung cancer” and therefore being “unable to work.” Some clients noted an exceptionally high heating bill, while others reported that a family member had recently lost a job, stretching their own paycheck even further.

### *Employment and Pantry Use*

Employment is not an insurance policy against hunger. More than 25 percent of individuals who came to the CVFP reported having a job at the time of the survey. This number is likely to be an underestimate of working households, as there may be unreported household members who hold jobs and a number of respondents chose not to answer this question. The breakdown of emergency to supplemental clients as well as employed to unemployed clients can be seen in Table 3.

The typical client of CVFP holding a job is likely to be an emergency client, meaning he or she has been coming to the pantry for three months or less. Of survey respondents with jobs, 74 percent were emergency clients. That makes sense, because we expect the unemployed to need help. However, the generally accepted view of most Americans is that having a job makes it easier for the poor to buy essentials such as food. If an individual has a crisis, she or he may need help but not for an extended period of time. It therefore makes sense that people with jobs are most often emergency clients.

Surprisingly, though, long-term pantry clients include a considerable number of employed individuals. Twenty-six percent of this group reported having a job. Very simply put, for these people, employment is not enough to avoid food insecurity.

On the other hand, a majority of CVFP clients are unemployed. However, there is a similar distribution of emergency versus supplemental clients when compared to the employed group. Of survey respondents without jobs, 71 percent were emergency clients and 29 percent were supplemental clients. The ratio of supplemental and emergency cases is generally consistent within the categories. In general, one might expect to find that being employed would reduce the odds of being a supplemental client, as compared to being unemployed. That is, if you had a job, you would be more food secure and less reliant on donated food from a nonprofit pantry. The data presented here contradict that expectation. The employed are not overwhelmingly more likely to be food secure. In fact, they are very similar to the unemployed.

One of the most notable findings of this article is that employed people need regular food assistance. The natural questions then become where do they work and what types of jobs do they hold. Though many report working in service and food industries, where wages are typically low, some report places of employment where wages and benefits are typically higher. The range of employers includes hospitals, farms, and local governments. It appears that employees in all sectors are at risk of becoming food insecure.

Rather than easing financial burdens, having a job appears to increase the weight of an individual’s responsibilities. One client reported coming to the pantry because of having “not enough Food Stamps and not enough work hours.” CVFP’s working clients are more likely to own their homes than are CVFP clients who are unemployed (see Table 4). They are also slightly more likely to rent than to live with a friend or relative.

While these results are specific to this sample, the findings for long-term clients seem to mirror the *Hunger in America 2006* study. The vast majority of food pantry

**Table 4.** Types of Expenses Competing with Food for Clients Cedar Valley Food Panty (Iowa, 2004–06)

Item	Employed		Unemployed	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Prescriptions	126	24	327	23
Rent/mortgage	317	62	657	45
Unexpected expense	163	32	321	22
Utilities	240	47	530	37
Medical bills	123	24	239	17
Clothing	111	22	228	16
Kids’ school expenses	103	20	168	12
Other	102	20	246	17
Total	1,285		2,716	
N = 1,897				

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Note: Totals do not add to 100 percent because clients could choose more than one option.

clients in this sample, and across America, are providing homes for themselves and their families. These are not the stereotypical homeless begging for handouts.

As demonstrated in the following table, people with limited resources are forced to make many difficult decisions impacting their access to food. At higher rates than those without jobs, working clients report having been unable to purchase food because of having to pay rent or mortgage, to buy clothes for themselves and their children, to pay for medical bills and prescriptions, and to pay utility bills. The typical employed CVFP client is unable to meet the demands of life that follow holding down a job—a home, power, medicine, and clothes—for themselves and loved ones. These clients, more so than those without jobs, had to choose between certain necessities and foods.

Some clients reported additional stressors. Owning a car, often a necessity for those who need to get to work on a regular basis or interview for a new job, creates its own set of bills. Central Iowans, like many other Americans, do not have access to an extensive, affordable public transportation system. Neither Waterloo nor Cedar Falls, Iowa, the main urban area served by this food bank, has a significant public transportation system. Survey respondents frequently cited car repairs, car insurance, gas, car payments, and other car-related expenses as tying up their funds.

Family problems could also affect finances. Childcare, diapers, baby formula, and additional necessities related to infants often topped the list of other expenses competing with food. One woman reported having trouble paying for both bills and food because of her “ex-husband not sending in child support.” Other domestic problems reported include being in an “abusive relationship” or separating from a spouse.

### *Government Support and Pantry Use*

After understanding the type of clients coming to the pantry, their working status, crises clients experienced, and items competing for scarce resources, we turn to the propensity of clients to receive government benefits. Approximately half of the CVFP respondents receive government benefits. Of those receiving government benefits, most are enrolled in only one program, but 335 of the 1,897 respondents (18 percent) report receipt of more than one type of benefit. Table 5 summarizes the distribution of clients by type of governmental service.

**Table 5.** Type of Client and Receipt of Governmental Benefits Cedar Valley Food Pantry (Iowa, 2004–06)

Type of Client	Does Not Receive Benefits		Receives Benefits		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Emergency	786	81	563	61	1,349	71
Supplemental	190	20	358	39	548	39
Total	976	101	921	100	1,897	100

*Source:* Authors' calculations.

*Note:*  $N = 1,897$ . Total percents may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Federal entitlement programs were created to help Americans experiencing crises. The intent was to enroll people for short-term assistance until they overcame the challenges thrusting them toward poverty. Neither welfare nor the Food Stamp Program is designed to be a long-term answer to poverty. The myth of the “welfare queen” has been debunked.

However, a new trend is emerging: government benefits are not enough to meet a family’s needs. In what might be a positive finding, this study supports the idea that emergency clients are ones who have had a crisis, and most emergency clients (89 percent) are not yet “in the system” of government support. But in what might be a bleak finding, a substantial portion of clients coming to the food pantry on a regular basis *are* “in the system” (39 percent), meaning government programs, such as food stamps and social security, are not lifting them out of a situation of food insecurity. This disquieting reality suggests that even when coupled with private, nonprofit resources, government benefits are not enough. The data highlight an alarming increase in the percentage of long-term clients accessing dual service providers. The implication is that the amount of resources intended to ameliorate crises is insufficient.

Being employed did not mean an individual did not still need government assistance. Unlike CVFP clients without jobs, employed clients frequently rely on only one type of government assistance. However, more than 13 percent of working clients received more than one of these types of government support.

*Factors Influencing a Client’s Status as Emergency or Supplemental*

Being able to describe the percentages of CVFP clients who are employed or who received government benefits does not help us understand why a client moves from a short-term crisis to long-term supplemental assistance. To begin understanding those relationships we used logistic regression. In our model, we considered how employment and receiving government benefits influence whether a client is designated as emergency or supplemental. The results of the final model are in Table 6.<sup>7</sup>

Several findings jump out from this analysis. Readers should remember that we are always referencing the benchmark of not having the characteristic and that these data refer to northeast Iowa. Three variables were statistically significant in our

**Table 6.** Logistic Regression for Client Status (Supplemental vs. Emergency) Cedar Valley Food Panty (Iowa, 2004–06)

Characteristic	Odds Ratio
Employed	1.197*
Receives social security	1.762***
Receives welfare	0.816
Receives food stamps	2.041***
Employed and receives government benefits	0.879

Note: Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> = 0.08.

\*p < 0.10; \*\*\*p < 0.001.

model. We expected employment to be a significant and negative characteristic that decreased the likelihood a client would move from the emergency category to the supplemental. Surprisingly, being employed is significant only at the exploratory level ( $p < 0.10$ ) and the effect is *positive*. Compared to emergency clients, the odds of being a supplemental client are 1.2 times greater when the person is employed than when not employed. In other words, supplemental clients are 20 percent more likely to be employed than emergency clients are. Employed clients of the CVFP were more likely than the unemployed to sacrifice food for medicine, housing, utilities, and other life necessities. For the poor in low-wage, service, food processing or farm work jobs, it appears that working does not make it easier to put food on the table. In fact, working in these jobs can make putting food on the table harder. One possibility is that clients that are already employed can do little to change their situation. If they were unemployed, getting a job might have a positive impact and prevent them from becoming supplemental, long-term food pantry clients. But having a job and still experiencing food insecurity means the problem is much more difficult to surmount.

Our expectations for the government benefits variables (social security, food stamps, and welfare) were similar to what we expected with employment. Again, we were wrong. While we thought having some social security income would lessen the likelihood of being a long-term pantry client, receiving social security benefits does not make a person more likely to have sufficient food resources. Long-term pantry users are almost two times more likely to be social security recipients than emergency clients. It seems that, at least for some elderly poor, social security is not providing enough financial stability to create food security.

Finally, even getting food stamps has a negative impact on the likelihood that a person visiting the CVFP is a short-terminer. Receiving food stamps more than doubles one's odds of needing long-term nonprofit food assistance. Food stamps are clearly not providing enough food for families to avoid chronic food insecurity.

In sum, neither having a job nor receiving government assistance seems to matter. Many citizens rely on help both from government *and* nonprofits to make ends meet. Those who are working and receiving benefits are almost as likely to need long-term assistance as those who only receive benefits or those who do not receive benefits and are not working. These findings indicate society needs to find a comprehensive solution to the problem of hunger in America.

#### *Similarities of the CVFP to The National Hunger in America 2006 Study*

The results of the *Hunger in America 2006* study are similar to those of this report in several respects. The weighted percentage of *Hunger in America 2006* interviews with pantry clients, as opposed to kitchen or shelter clients, is 76 percent. Of the pantry interviewees, 37 percent reported that at least one member of their household was employed. *Hunger in America 2006* also asked what types of government support pantry clients received. Participation in the Food Stamp Program is the most widespread form of government support reported for pantry clients for both *Hunger in America 2006* and the CVFP survey. For the most part, other government assistance

**Table 7.** Housing Arrangements for Respondents across the Two Surveys

Housing Arrangement	Hunger in	Emergency	CVFP Survey	All
	America Pantry Clients	Clients	Supplemental Clients	Clients
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Rent	66	48	62	62
Own	16	13	14	16
Live with someone other than a relative	<sup>a</sup>	2	< 1	1
Live with a relative	<sup>a</sup>	8	12	13
Live free with someone else	15	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>
Homeless	<sup>a</sup>	4	5	4
Other	2	4	4	5
	N = 36,877	N = 827	N = 508	N = 1,335

Source: Authors' calculations from CVFP survey and Hunger in America 2006.

<sup>a</sup>These questions were not asked on this survey or were asked in a different format. CVFP, Cedar Valley Food Pantry.

programs showed similar levels of use, yet in a slight disconnect, 36 percent of all *Hunger in America 2006* interviewees reported receiving social security compared to 21 percent of CVFP respondents.

The housing situation for *Hunger in America 2006* and CVFP respondents was also similar. Of *Hunger in America 2006* interviewees, 3 percent were homeless while 4 percent of CVFP respondents were homeless. While the *Hunger in America 2006* study asked whether clients “live free with someone else,” the CVFP divided this category into two options: “live with a relative” or “live with someone other than a relative.” These numbers were most similar for those who rented. The housing situation for clients in both *Hunger in America 2006* and the CVFP Survey can be seen in Table 7.

### Limitations

The limitations of this article lie in the unique nature of working with an ongoing survey constructed for organizational purposes rather than research purposes. While we feel this is an accurate portrait of the clients at the largest food pantry in northeast Iowa, we can not confidently say it represents a typical pantry or that the findings would apply to other pantries. However, the similarities between our results and those of the recent national survey suggest it is not unlikely.

There are also some methodological limitations. For example, some of the last emergency clients included in our article will eventually become supplemental outside of our time period. Therefore, some of the observations categorized as emergency will eventually become supplemental. However, since we estimate that only about 10 percent of those would make that status change, and this would only affect the emergency clients making their first or second visit at the end of our studied time period, we assume this is not enough to significantly affect our results. In the future, truncating the sample or using a longer time period would eliminate this problem.

We choose not to truncate the sample in order to include as much information in the analysis as possible. We would like to use a longer time period in future research.

Also, as to the nature of our sample, our results are reported with and should be generalized with caution. As mentioned above, the stock and flow issue means our sample is more heavily weighted to emergency clients than to supplemental, opposite of the actual population distribution. We have limited information about the clients participating in these surveys and are unable to anticipate confidently who might be excluded from the sample or what impact that has on our results. Nonetheless, the overall high response rate and relatively complete set of usable surveys gives us rich, unique data for analysis.

Finally, with this nonrandom sample, we report the statistical significance because it is an indicator of the potential importance of that variable. However, here, a significant finding has no greater explanatory power because we are unable to draw generalizable conclusions from these results. We are able to assert confidently that these results are accurate reflections of the people who received food from CVFP between 2004 and 2006, but we have no ability to understand whether that group is a reflection of the total population using this or any other food pantry. Still, as we noted earlier, the findings are consistent with those from other national studies, and for that reason these results contribute to increasing our understanding of food pantry client usage patterns.

## Conclusions

A sizable portion of clients at the CVFP already work or are on government support programs. Unexpectedly, working does not appear to alleviate the need for regular food assistance. Job-related demands, such as transportation, childcare, and uncovered health care costs, force choices between food and other necessities. In fact, working individuals are more likely to report having to make difficult choices between basic life necessities and food than those who are unemployed. Working may make life more difficult. In addition, this article suggests government support programs such as social security and food stamps are an insufficient guard against hunger, and thousands of Americans turn to nonprofits to fill the gap.

The policy ramifications of these findings are clear. First, policies encouraging work among the poor should recognize the standard of living for these individuals may become less stable, rather than more so, as a result. Instead of making life easier, working can actually make it harder for poor people to make ends meet. Policies dealing with minimum wage levels, living wages, job-related health care, transportation, and childcare assistance should be reexamined in light of these results. Jobs programs focused on placing individuals in these types of jobs should recognize that to do so will not improve the worker's situation in terms of food security, and may, in fact, make it worse.

Second, our national social support structure is inadequate. If we wish to maintain the government responsibility to alleviate hunger in our country, benefits for eligible citizens must be increased or food assistance nonprofits need greater gov-



ernment support. Unless we address these two issues, we should face the fact that as an undeclared public policy, our society tolerates hunger.

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### Notes

1. Data from this study have been placed in a public archive at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Odum Institute for Social Sciences.
2. This refers to entitlement TEFAP. Another program, Bonus TEFAP, allows the federal government to purchase product from industry or farmers. In this instance, states may choose whether they wish to accept the product or not.
3. The Northeast Iowa Food Bank in Waterloo, Iowa, serves the following counties: Allamakee, Black Hawk, Buchanan, Butler, Bremer, Chickasaw, Clayton, Delaware, Fayette, Floyd, Grundy, Howard, Mitchell, Poweshiek, Tama, and Winnebago.
4. The USDA estimates participation in the Food Stamp Program will decrease by 1.1 million people in the coming fiscal year because of high Disaster Food Stamp Program use in 2005 due to hurricanes (FRAC, 2006b).
5. The specific survey questions can be found in Appendix D of the *Hunger in America 2006* study (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2006, D.3–D.9).
6. In the interest of space, we do not present a complete analysis of this subgroup. The response rate for this subgroup dropped dramatically in comparison to other food pantry clients. As a result, summary statistics or the results of regression analysis are at risk for bias and are therefore not reliable.
7. The logistic regression analysis was carried out by the logistic procedure in SPSS version 15.0 using the Advanced Statistical Package.

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