



How Food Stamps and Pantries Succeed – and Fall Short – at Alleviating Hunger in an Iowa County and Beyond

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Millions of Americans lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious food. Food insecurity in America is a symptom of other social problems – low wages, unaffordable housing, and unforeseen medical expenses. With costs associated with health care, child care, and housing on the rise, low-income families often have little or no money left to spend on food. At the same time, food insecurity is associated with a variety of other health problems.

America's Food Stamps program – officially now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – was implemented in the mid-1960's to improve the nutrition of low-income families. The program has succeeded in lifting a couple million Americans above the poverty line, but other families are still either unserved or underserved by this effort. Mostly reliant on local charity and food donations, pantries help fill the gaps left by the federal Food Stamps program. Together, Food Stamps and local pantries help alleviate food insecurity, but neither is adequate in solving the problem. To meet their families' daily needs, many insecure Americans are left to navigate a patchwork of programs and services.

A Major Insecurity

Nationally, 15.4 percent of Americans were officially counted as “food insecure” during 2014. Food insecurity rates vary significantly across states from a high of 22.3 percent in Mississippi to a low of eight percent in North Dakota. The overall rate of food insecurity among households in Iowa is 12.4 percent, but food insecurity rates can vary within a state. The rate of food insecurity is 14.2 percent in Johnson County, Iowa, home to the University of Iowa with a population of nearly 150,000.

In 2014, Johnson County assembled a Hunger Task Force in order to assess the state of community food insecurity. The group conducted a survey with about 500 food pantry clients, gathered feedback from emergency food service providers, and engaged in key informant interviews with the assistance of rural church congregations and school social workers. The task force then compiled a report underlining key themes and recommendations. Although this report highlights the lessons from one community, many of these lessons along with the challenges it discusses are relevant to the experiences of communities across the country.

Lessons from the Hunger Task Force

One important finding of the Johnson County study is that only about half of food pantry respondents received Food Stamp benefits. Many pantry users said they make too much money to qualify for federal

benefits, which means that food pantries fill an important role in communities for households without access to regular Food Stamp benefits. The application and renewal process for Food Stamps also creates barriers. Potential recipients with language impediments, limited phone access, and daytime work hours may find it difficult to jump through the necessary hoops. A lack of translators, long wait times on the phone for assistance, and unanticipated phone calls lead some applicants to fall through the cracks.

- Food Stamp recipients may need pantries because there is a benefit cliff – some families reported that they abruptly stopped receiving benefits after a modest increase in income, even though their needs for extra food persisted.
- Other families do qualify for Food Stamps, but still turn to pantries toward the end of the month when their monthly allocations are depleted.
- Notably, a majority of clients surveyed used food pantries to meet most of their grocery needs, although these programs are designed to provide only supplemental supplies.
- Some clients who use both Food Stamps *and* food pantries are still unable to meet their families' needs. Fifteen percent of pantry clients surveyed reported visiting two or more pantries regularly.

On its own, we can see that Food Stamps (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) fails to meet some families' needs, leaving community programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens to make up the difference. Some communities have a network of nonprofits and charities that work hard to alleviate hunger, but smaller rural communities may have fewer of these resources at their disposal.

Results from the Hunger Task Force Report for Johnson County are not unique to one county in eastern Iowa. Many studies using national data sources find that food purchases and consumption fall towards the end of the benefit month. Although food insecurity rates decline as income rises, national rates show high food insecurity for families just above the income-eligibility thresholds for Food Stamps. Finally, barriers to enrollment across the country inhibit many eligible households from using the program.

What Can be Done

The insights from the Hunger Task Force suggest a few desirable national and local changes.

- The federal Food Stamp program application process could be streamlined to make it easier for needy households to enroll. For example, applications should be available in multiple languages and should be available for completion and tracking entirely online. Applicants should be able to schedule a verification process phone call online.
- Because Food Stamp benefits are often tight, the U.S. Department of Agriculture as program administrator should consider allowing states to experiment with distributing benefits more frequently to minimize drop offs in food consumption at month's end.
- Community food pantries and soup kitchens play a vital role in reducing food insecurity. With a greater investment in Food Stamps, community resources could focus on meeting emergency food needs, as they are best designed to do.

Read more in Lynette Jacoby and Natalie Veldhouse, "[Johnson County Hunger Task Force Report](#)," Johnson County Social Services, February 2016.