



# Snapshots

Research Highlights from the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund

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## Hunger in America

### Three Studies Assess the Charitable Food Sector and Federal Welfare Policy

Dependence on emergency food—from charitable pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters—has become an unfortunate fact of life for too many Americans, say three studies funded by the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund. While researchers applaud the generosity and dedication of those who keep emergency food efforts afloat, they suggest that there are real limits to the capacity of volunteer efforts to meet needs and that these initiatives may unwittingly divert the nation's attention from fixing a federal welfare policy that is flawed.

“Second Harvest’s 1997 National Research Study: Hunger 1997—The Faces and Facts,” by David VanAmburg, VanAmburg Group, Inc., provides a comprehensive nationwide profile of charitable food provider organizations and those who depend on them. “The Impact of Welfare Reform on the Charitable Food Sector,” by Peter Eisinger, Wayne State University, quantifies policy effects on both voluntary organizations and people in need. *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, by Janet Poppendieck, City University of New York, is a book-length study that illustrates the inadequacies and many social uses of the emergency food sector and outlines some of the challenges associated with policy reform.

**In This Issue:**  
**Welfare Reform’s  
Impact on Hunger**

### Hunger in America: Faces and Facts

The most comprehensive profile of charitable emergency food recipients and providers ever conducted, VanAmburg’s study of the Second Harvest network provides an especially useful benchmark of emergency food services because it was completed in the winter of 1997, before the welfare reforms of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) took effect.

Second Harvest is a national network of 186 food banks that work with nearly 50,000 local social service agencies to distribute donated food and grocery products to almost 26 million needy people every year.

VanAmburg’s research is based on 11,000 mail surveys of charitable agencies and 28,000 face-to-face interviews with recipients at about 3,400 feed-

ing sites including pantries, kitchens, and shelters. Local research was conducted by 79 food banks across the United States. “The size, scope, and services of the Second Harvest network,” VanAmburg says, “have made the organization a significant national voice on the hunger issue in this country.”

Research revealed that the Second Harvest network provides roughly one billion pounds of food per year to feed the hungry in America. More than 50 percent of agencies in the Second Harvest network are affiliated with a faith community, and 39 percent are private, non-sectarian nonprofits. Most agencies operate on a median annual income of \$5,700 and don’t receive any government funding. On average, they have five paid staff members and 60 volunteers who contribute 2,595 volunteer hours a year.

Profiles of clients and emergency food providers have been largely overlooked in research on the efficacy of food assistance pro-



## The Faces of Hunger in America

“Second Harvest’s 1997 National Research Study: Hunger 1997” offers a useful profile of those who use emergency food programs in America:

- Most emergency food recipients have their own housing (80 percent); 16 percent are homeless. Of those who have their own housing, 35 percent report having to choose between buying food or paying their rent or mortgage. Eighty percent of recipient households have an annual household income of less than \$15,500.

- About 41 percent of recipients participate in the federal food stamp program; more have applied and are waiting for approval. In 30 percent of all emergency food households, Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is the primary income source.
- A disproportionate number of emergency food recipients are women (62 percent), children (38 percent), or seniors over the age of 65 (16 percent).

- Fifty-four percent of recipient households are headed by a single parent (as compared to 23 percent nationally).
- Forty percent of recipients lack a high school diploma; 36 percent have only a high school education.
- A large percentage of recipients are employed (20 percent) or have at least one adult in the household working (39 percent).

- The ethnicity of recipients deviates from national percentages: non-Hispanic white individuals represent 73 percent of the US population, but at feeding sites whites comprise 47 percent of the population. African Americans represent 13 percent of the US population, but 32 percent of recipients, and Hispanics represent 11 percent of the US population, but 15 percent of emergency food recipients.

grams (see above box for details on emergency food clients). VanAmburg’s study provides a wealth of information that can inform policymaking, including these key findings:

- The current food inventories of charities cannot meet the demand. “The Second Harvest research found that between 77,000 to 150,000 people were turned away by local agencies because the local charitable agency lacked food,” says VanAmburg.
- Since the working poor represent a large number of the households served in emergency food sites, issues related to the minimum wage, underemployment, adequate day care, and health insurance are crucial in the lives of emergency food clients.
- Children who participate in breakfast or lunch programs during the school year are turning to emergency food providers during the summer. “Forty-seven percent of local agencies report a

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seasonal demand during the summer of children requesting emergency food,” says VanAmburg.

## The Impact of Welfare Reform on Hunger

PRWORA’s impacts have overwhelmed the charitable sector with needs it can’t be expected to fulfill, says Eisinger in his study, “The Impact of Welfare Reform on the Charitable Food Sector.” Eisinger surveyed 229 food pantry and soup kitchen clients in 14 different Detroit area programs during the winter and spring of 1999.

PRWORA reduced the number of people eligible for food stamps and cut the average monthly food stamp allotment. In the Detroit area, Eisinger estimates that 36,000 people were using emergency food provision agencies as a result of welfare reform changes. “Welfare reform, in its assault on dependency,” Eisinger argues, “may simply have had the ironic consequence of replacing dependency on food stamps with dependency on private charity.”

The emergency food provision sector is not equipped to feed more people. “In Detroit, about one-fifth of the directors [of charitable feeding sites] in the survey reported that food donations decreased in the year prior to the interview,” says Eisinger, “and another 30 percent reported that donations were steady, even in a period of rising demand.”

**“The added burden on the charitable sector is the product not of economic upheavals and fluctuations beyond human control but rather of a deliberate policy decision to reduce government welfare spending.”**

—Peter Eisinger

Eisinger estimates that 20 percent of the clients at emergency food sites are there as a result of welfare reform—most because the reduced food stamp allotment didn’t meet household needs. The rest were single people between 18 and 50 whose three-month time limit on food stamps was up and who were not working or in an approved job training or volunteer program.

“The added burden on the charitable sector is the product not of economic upheavals and fluctuations

beyond human control but rather of a deliberate policy decision to reduce government welfare spending,” says Eisinger. “This policy decision has increased the burden on nonprofit institutions already too poorly endowed to meet the demands for food assistance.”

## The Wenceslas Syndrome: Treating Symptoms But Not Causes

Poppendieck’s study embraces the findings of the preceding two studies and suggests that volunteer initiatives may reduce government efforts. “If charity food provision is increasingly substituting for adequate public provision,” says Poppendieck, “then it is time to take a closer look at the costs of kindness.”

Poppendieck begins her book with the story of her start on the research. Setting out on foot through a storm to get to a soup kitchen, the Christmas carol “Good King Wenceslas” came into her mind. The carol celebrates a king who traveled through snow to deliver food and fuel to the poor, serving as a model to his young page.

Like Wenceslas, Poppendieck finds a kingdom in great need. People in America are hungry due to a range of factors: inadequate wages and seasonal employment; high costs of shelter, transportation, and clothing; bureaucratic problems with public assistance, for example.

Yet Poppendieck sees Wenceslas’s well-intended response to need as a problem with lessons for our time. The “Wenceslas Syndrome,” she says, is “the process by which the joys and demands of personal charity divert us from more fundamental solutions to the problems of deepening poverty and growing inequality...”

Although emergency food provision does much good, Poppendieck’s research reveals that emergency food efforts are also rife with problems that may translate into increased trauma and want for people who use food pantries and soup kitchens. For example, because the food donated to food banks reflects available surplus, much of it is nutritionally undesirable: it tends to be high in fat, sugar, and sodium and low in nutritive value. (For other concerns about emergency food provision, see “Problems of Emergency Food Provision” on inside panel.) Emergency food should not be a way of life, Poppendieck says, but a response to a true emergency: for victims of natural disasters, for families who have lost their homes, for those caught in the gap between applying for public assistance and receiving it, for example.

On a large scale, Poppendieck calls for change in the ways Americans think about those in need and for more advocacy. Even within emergency food provision, she warns, there is resistance to political activism for a number of reasons: addressing the causes of hunger is politically divisive; volunteers have no time to provide food and engage in advocacy; and volunteers prefer hands-on labor with people to advocacy work.

At the end of her study, Poppendieck returns to the Wenceslas story. What if the king had worked to create a more just and equitable society instead of just giving some of his food to the poor, she asks. And what if emergency food clients themselves could become participants in the process—helping to run programs, having a voice, and contributing their insight and labor—

“If charity food provision is increasingly substituting for adequate public provision. . . then it is time to take a closer look at the costs of kindness.”

—Janet Poppendieck

instead of being passive recipients?

Readers may obtain copies of VanAmburg’s and Eisinger’s studies by contacting The Aspen Institute’s Publications Office at (410) 820-5338. Poppendieck’s book, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, based on research funded by the Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, is published by Viking (1998).

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## Problems of Emergency Food Provision

### **Insufficiency**

Since emergency food providers rely on corporate, individual, and government donations, they cannot predict the quantity or type of food they will get. They can't predict the demand for food since people come voluntarily to providers. These factors lead providers to offer some food to many people rather than a satisfying amount to a few.

### **Nutritional Inadequacy**

Emergency pantries contain an astounding amount of junk food: one food bank director estimates that less than a quarter of foods from reclamation centers is nutritionally desirable.

### **Instability**

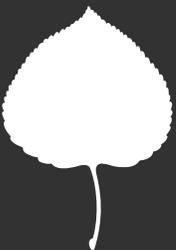
Government distributes commodities to emergency food providers when production and market conditions produce a surplus, but takes steps to correct the situation by, for example, buying farmers out of business. Similarly, businesses donate food when production and marketing problems lead to surpluses or when distribution processes damage goods, but these problems are also corrected as soon as possible. Emergency food provision thus leads to a more efficient food system that will contribute less food to food banks and soup kitchens. Volunteer staffing and turnover can also be a source of instability.

### **Inaccessibility**

Since emergency food provision is unplanned and unsynchronized, there are gaps in service and areas that are overserved. Poorer areas don't always have resources of space, transportation, or volunteers with the necessary organizational skills to set up and run a center; in rural areas clients may have trouble getting the food home and food banks may get fewer products donated by business.

### **Inefficiency**

There is enormous labor involved in getting food to people via the emergency food system: in a food drive, for example, the product has to be purchased at a retail store, carried home or to a collection bin, transferred to a central collection point, redistributed to a local pantry, and handed out to those in need. With food stamps, on the other hand, clients can select and take home products directly from the retail site.



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