



# Regional Profile of Missouri Food Pantry Clients and Households<sup>1</sup>

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## Talking Points

- A survey of 1,150 food pantry clients in north central Missouri showed them to be mainly of middle age, white, and female, living with at least one other person. Half live in a household with one working adult.
- Recipients make tradeoff decisions between food and gasoline, rent, utilities, or medical care. Many also obtain food from elsewhere, the most important alternative being Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps).
- The research indicates that proposed reductions in federal food assistance programs will impose additional hardships on pantry clients and the food pantries that serve them.

## Introduction

Across the United States, food pantries are a part of the food safety net for 5.6 million individuals, or 4.8 percent of all U.S. households (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2011). In fact, since 2007 when the current recession began, the number of food pantries has risen over 20 percent (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews & Carlson, 2010). According to Feeding America, the largest domestic hunger-relief charity in the United States, approximately 990,770 (16.8%) of Missouri's residents attended a food pantry in 2009.

<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri. The Center was established in 2004 in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. Participating faculty come from four MU colleges and are engaged in integrated programs of research, training, and extension focused on domestic food security issues.

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In the summer of 2010, we interviewed more than 1,150 food pantry clients in central and northeast Missouri. The surveys covered a variety of topics, including client and household demographics, food security, food sources, and health and nutrition. The results summarized below demonstrate that pantries serve a very diverse set of households that face a number of pressures in meeting their food needs. Further, pantry clients are much more likely than the general population to have health problems for which diet and nutrition are relevant considerations. Because the number of food pantries and the number of people who use them are at historically high levels, and due to the vulnerabilities of pantry clients, it is important to know more about these households and their use of food pantries and to continue to improve this component of the emergency food assistance system.

This report summarizes a survey of 1,150 food pantry clients in north central Missouri. These clients tended to be of middle age, white, and female, living with at least one other person. Fifty percent live in a household with one working adult. Recipients reported having to make tradeoff decisions: food v. gasoline, rent, utilities, and medical care. Food pantry users also obtained food elsewhere; the most important alternative source was the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps). This research indicates that proposed reductions in federal food assistance programs will impose additional hardships on pantry clients and the food pantries that serve them.

## Study Methods

This brief is based on a survey of food pantry clients in the 32-county region of central and northeast Missouri defined by the service area of the Columbia-based Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri. The Food Bank delivers food to nearly 70 locations for off-site preparation and consumption, and in addition, operates a mobile pantry that makes monthly visits to sites in the region. Before determining target pantries, however, we pared our list by removing any pantry servicing a monthly average of less than 0.75 percent of the 2009 regional totals of food pantry clients. This decision removed nearly 30 pantries from our list, but these facilities together served less than 19 percent of the average regional client population of close to 71,000 persons.

Of the 42 pantries eligible for inclusion, only one refused permission to recruit participants; the non-participating pantry served an average of 1.2 percent of the remaining sample. The statistics in this report thus include results from 41 pantry facilities that together assisted more than 80 percent of food pantry client households in the region and operated in 26 of the 32 counties serviced by the regional food bank. Food pantry clients were interviewed in-person from May to July 2010. Clients were systematically selected for participation and the structured interviews typically lasted 20-30 minutes. We approached 1,520 clients for interviews. We had 324 refusals (21.3%) and 29 clients (1.9%) began but did not complete interviews. The completion rate (N=1167) was thus 76.8 percent, which is a very high level of responses. Rapid appraisal analysis of age and gender of non-respondents does not suggest any bias in our sample of participants versus all pantry clients.

## Food Pantry Clients and Households

Among food pantry clients in this region, about half (51%) were between the ages of 40 and 64 years old, while 37 percent were between the ages of 18 to 39 and 12 percent were over the age

of 65. A majority of the clients were female (76%). Eighty-six percent of the clients self-identified themselves as white, 9 percent as black, and 5 percent described themselves as “other”. Three percent reported their descent as Hispanic/Latino. Missouri pantry clients were mostly high school graduates (42%), while 26 percent had less than a high school diploma, 26 percent had some years of college, and 6 percent were college graduates. Regarding marital status, the largest number of pantry clients were married (37%), while 13 percent were living with a partner, 8 percent were widowed, 27 percent were divorced or separated, and 15 percent were never married. Pantry clients were often mobile. Within the last two years, more than one-third of households (38%) changed residences. Of these, 48 percent had moved once from their residence, 41 percent had moved two to three times, and 11 percent had moved four or more times from their residence. The reasons for such moves often included those related to housing reasons (51%), family (23%), and work (10%).

Household size among Missouri food pantry clients varied. Many Missouri food pantry clients lived with other adults (18 years or older). Within this sample, 46 percent had two adults in their household (including themselves) and another 24 percent had three or more adults living in their household (including themselves).

About half (49%) of the households include children. Sixteen percent of the households reported having one child living with them, 17 percent reported having two children, and 16 percent of the households reported having three or more children living within the household. Ten percent of households included children and only a single adult.

When using the previous month’s total income as a proxy for annual household income, 33% of the households lived at 0 to 50 percent of the poverty level.<sup>3</sup> Forty percent of the households reported earning between 51 and 100 percent of the poverty level, while 28 percent of the households reported earning 101 percent or more of the poverty level. In regards to employment, 50 percent of the households had no working adults living in their household. Within the households reporting employment of at least one adult, almost two-thirds (64%) had at least one adult working full-time, while the remaining 36 percent noted only part-time (less than 35 hours per week) employment within the household.

Pantry clients include both those “new” to the system, as well as households that regularly depend most on food pantries as a source for food for their households. About one-third (38%) of the sample said that they do not regularly use the food pantry, while about the same number (36%) said that they have regularly used food pantries for 13 or more months, and can be considered long-term client households. The remaining (27%) have become regular clients of pantries at some point within the past 12 months.

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<sup>3</sup> The federal poverty level for 2012 is \$15,130 for a family of two.

## Food Security and Tradeoffs

Food security, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is having the access to “nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011) for all members of a household. To measure food security among Missouri food pantry clients, we utilized USDA’s six-question module and collapsed responses into one measure of food security using the USDA’s definition. In 2006 the USDA revised their labels (though not the measurements) of food insecurity, substituting low food security and very low food security for the previous labels of food insecure and food insecure with hunger. This brief uses the older labels. Among this sample, 39 percent were determined to be food insecure with hunger, while 37 percent of the sample was considered food insecure without hunger. The difference between those who are food insecure with hunger and those without hunger is determined by several questions that specifically ask respondents whether they or anyone in their household ever went hungry, ate less, or skipped meals because they couldn’t afford enough or any food. Only 24 percent of the sample indicated that they were food secure. As shown in Table 1, levels of food insecurity among our sample are very close to the national averages for all food pantry clients.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Food Pantry Clients as Compared to National Sample**

	Missouri 2010 %	Nationally 2010* %
<b>Children (&lt;age 18) in the Home</b>		
Yes (with 1 adult)	10	35
Yes (with 2 or more adults)	39	N.A.
No Children	51	N.A.
<b>Household Marital Status</b>		
Married	37	29
Living with partner	13	7
Widowed	8	11
Divorced/separated	27	29
Never Married	15	24
<b>Household Employment Status</b>		
No working adults	50	73
Working Adult, < 35 hours week	18	13
Working Adult, 35 or more hours week	32	14
<b>Household Income Level</b>		
0-50% of poverty level	33	37
51-100% of poverty level	40	45
101% or more of poverty level	28	21
<b>Household Food Security Level</b>		
Food Secure	24	24
Food Insecure, without hunger	37	41
Food Insecure, with hunger	39	35

\*Feeding America - “Hunger in America 2010: National Report Prepared for Feeding America”.

“N.A.” indicates that the data was “Not Available”.

Within the past 12 months, many food pantry client households in Missouri had to choose between buying the food they needed for their household and other expenses. This data can be seen in Table 2. Most often, health and medical care expenses tend to be neglected among those in poverty (Schiller, 2008), however most notably, Missouri food pantry clients had to choose between buying food and paying their utilities (56%) and gas (60%).

Interestingly, our research shows that there is not a significant change in food tradeoffs among pantry clients between 2010 and 2005 (Hermesen, Heflin & Rikoon, 2011). Although the lack of difference between the two years seems surprising, it could be that the increase use of SNAP and other outside food sources are keeping these numbers constant over time. This, however, does not negate the significance of food tradeoffs that food pantry clients continue to make.

**Table 2: Food Tradeoffs Among Food Pantry Clients**

	<b>Households %</b>
<b>Tradeoffs</b>	
Food vs. medical/medicine	46
Food vs. utilities	56
Food vs. rent or mortgage	42
Food vs. gas	60
<b>Number of Reported Tradeoffs</b>	
None	28
One	12
Two	14
Three	21
Four	25

## Food Sources

Respondents were asked how much money their households spent in an average week at grocery stores or other food venues. As reported in Table 3, households vary widely in their reports. While the mode category for household size increases with each succeeding larger household size, the per capita expenditures show a negative correlation with household size. Whereas the average one person household spends nearly \$44 per week on that person's food, the per capita number declines over 40 percent a month in two and three person households. For those with four or more people in their household, per capita spending declines to a little more than \$2 per day on average, or 60% a week less than single person households.

People will not only use food pantries to get the food they need, but they also access other sources including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Food Stamp Program, Women, Infant and Children, Meals on Wheels, family, and friends to acquire food.

**Table 3: Household Spending on Food by Household Size per Week**

	\$0-\$25 %	\$26-\$50 %	\$51-\$75 %	\$76-\$100 %	\$101 or more %	Per capita \$
<b>Household Size</b>						
1 person	40	37	4	10	5	43.69
2 people	22	37	19	12	7	27.97
3 people	7	25	26	18	20	28.16
4 or more people	5	15	14	23	41	16.82

It is important to look at these other sources of foods in order to help explain how the gaps in food are being filled – if, in fact, those gaps in food sources are being filled. Table 4 presents the frequency trends for client household use of various food sources.

**Table 4: Frequency of Use of Other Food Sources Over the Previous 12 Months**

	Never at all %	Some Months %	Every month %
SNAP/Food Stamp Program	45	2	53
Program (Women, Infant and Children)	86	1	13
Meals on Wheels	97	0	2
Relatives and family living outside of household	61	29	9
Friends	78	18	4
Neighbors or co-workers	90	8	2
Hunting/Fishing	67	29	4
Gardens	61	38	2

The only food source used by a majority (53%) of respondents is the SNAP, formerly the Food Stamps Program. Much smaller percentages of food pantry clients also regularly used the WIC Program (13%) and their relatives or family members living outside the house (9%). The food source used least among food pantry clients was the program Meals on Wheels (97%). Food pantry clients also did not utilize their neighbors or co-workers (90%) as often as other food sources.

Seventy-nine percent of the respondents reported having seen a doctor or nurse in the last year for their health. Table 5 shows the health conditions faced by food pantry clients. Within our sample, 21 percent of respondents have been diagnosed with diabetes, 46 percent have high blood pressure, and 45 percent have been diagnosed with high cholesterol. These percentages are all considerably higher than state averages.

**Table 5: Health Vulnerabilities of Pantry Clients**

	<b>Pantry Clients</b> %	<b>Missouri State Average*</b> %
Diabetes	21	8
High Blood Pressure	46	31
High Cholesterol	45	38
BMI in Obesity Range	52	31

\*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2009 Survey Data.

Food pantry clients also self-reported their health status. Fifty-one percent felt that in general their health was in fair to poor condition. However, 30 percent felt that their health was in good condition, 12 percent felt that their health was in very good condition, and 7 percent felt that their health was in excellent condition.

Table 6 shows the self-reported health of the respondents broken down by individual reports of different health conditions. Most notably, those who are overweight, obese, or with a health condition often recognize that they are in fair to poor health, while only a minority number of these respondents report their health to be in excellent or very good condition. Thus, it is fair to conclude that respondents who attend food pantries feel that they are not in excellent or very good health and often have serious health vulnerabilities for which nutrition and diet are important considerations.

**Table 6: Client Self-reported Health by Health Conditions of Respondents**

	<b>Excellent</b> %	<b>Very Good</b> %	<b>Good</b> %	<b>Fair</b> %	<b>Poor</b> %
<b>Total</b>	7	12	30	34	17
<b>Body Mass Index (BMI) of Respondent</b>					
Normal	10	14	33	32	11
Overweight	11	14	28	31	16
Obese	4	9	31	37	20
<b>Health Conditions of Respondent</b>					
No Health Conditions	12	16	37	25	9
Diabetes	4	5	18	41	32
High Blood Pressure	3	8	24	41	25
High cholesterol	2	7	21	43	28

In the hope of moving towards more nutritionally-sound diets across the U.S., food pantries can serve as an important source of foods that fit clients' dietary needs. In order to assist pantries in knowing more about client patterns, several questions were asked about the frequencies of consumption of specific foods (see Table 7) in a typical week. Fresh and canned fruits are either not a part of a pantry clients' diet (28%) or are consumed only rarely (40%) in the majority of cases. Fresh, frozen, and canned vegetables, on the other hand, seem to be consumed more often than fresh or frozen fruits within a typical week, although these items are not consumed on a

daily basis by the vast majority of clients. Milk is used most frequently on a regular basis, while dried beans or canned beans are the least frequently consumed of all food types.

**Table 7: Weekly Consumption of Selected Foods by Pantry Clients**

	<b>0 times</b> %	<b>1-2 times</b> %	<b>3-6 times</b> %	<b>7+ times</b> %
Fresh or frozen fruits	28	39	20	14
Canned fruits	35	40	18	8
Fresh or frozen vegetables	24	29	26	20
Canned vegetables	12	24	38	26
Drink Milk or Use Milk	23	16	18	43
Dried Beans or Canned Beans	43	30	16	11

## Conclusion

This data suggests several important implications and consequences. First, the food pantry client population is very heterogeneous. The diversity among the clients and households that depend on food pantries means that there is no single portrait of the average pantry user. There are client households that have used food pantries for many years, while there are clients who are new to using food pantries, perhaps due to the recent recession. Pantry clients are also diverse in age, marital status, residential status, and educational status. Additionally, this study suggests that this population is at risk for severe health conditions that are in part related to diet and nutrition. As much as food pantries are able to influence the types of foods they receive and distribute to their client households, they may be able to help vulnerable constituencies better meet their nutritional health needs. Further, pantries may serve as useful sites for nutrition and other educators to reach critical target audiences.

In light of the ongoing economic recession in the United States, it is ever more important that food pantries, not only in Missouri, but across the country, consider these implications and conclusions in order to better serve their clients. The numbers of households who fall below the poverty and food security lines continue to grow. As politicians attempt to address issues surrounding the national debt, there is a chance that public programs, including SNAP and WIC, which mitigate more widespread hunger, will be cut. Combined, the current economic and political trends suggest that food banks and food pantries will face increasing pressure to meet the nutritional needs of their clients.

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