

## Summary of Findings from the Wisconsin Survey of Food Pantry Clients

by

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### **Survey Overview**

University of Wisconsin – Extension conducted a survey of food pantry clients in 27 counties in Wisconsin during October 1999.<sup>1</sup> The survey was designed to address the following questions about people using food pantries in the state:

- ❖ What are their demographic characteristics?
- ❖ What are their employment circumstances?
- ❖ What do they feel prevents them from having a job, or from having a better job?
- ❖ What are their economic circumstances?
- ❖ To what extent are they connected with economic assistance programs?

Each county survey was coordinated by the county Nutrition Education Coordinator and/or Family Living Agent. Survey coordinators arranged for some or all of the food pantries in their counties to provide clients with a voluntary, self-administered survey. Surveys were available in English and Spanish. In many counties, Extension and/or food pantry staff were available to assist clients with the survey as needed. A total of 3997 food pantry clients completed the survey.

### **Key Findings**

#### **Demographics**

- Almost three-quarters of pantry users are female (73%).
- Pantries serve people of all ages: 11% of pantry users are age 17-25, 44% are age 25-44, 26% are age 45-64, and 19% are 65 or older.
- Families with children make up a substantial minority of pantry clients: 43% of pantry users have a child under 18 in their household, including 21% with a child under age 5. One-third of clients are single parents – usually single mothers.
- Education levels are generally low. However, almost two-thirds of pantry users do have at least a high school diploma or a GED, including 17% with some college or technical school. Only 2% of clients have a Bachelor's degree.
- One-quarter of pantry users report having a long-term disability or health problem that limits their ability to work.

#### **Employment**

- One-third of clients are employed, while 44% have at least one employed person in their household. Approximately one-third of employed clients work 20 or fewer hours per week, one-third work 21-39 hours, and one-third work full-time. Fewer than half of the non-working clients have been employed in the past year.
- Wages are variable, but not surprisingly, tend to be low. While more than three-quarters of employed clients earn above the minimum wage, only 18% earn more than \$8.00 per hour, and only 3% earn more than \$10.00 per hour.

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<sup>1</sup> Participating counties include Adams, Barron, Buffalo, Columbia, Dodge, Eau Claire, Florence, Fond du Lac, Grant, Green Lake, Iowa, Iron, La Crosse, Lafayette, Langlade, Manitowoc, Marinette, Oneida, Pepin, Rock, Sauk, Shawano, Taylor, Trempealeau, Walworth, Waupaca, and Winnebago.

### **Employment barriers among working-age clients**

- A disability or health problem is by far the most frequently cited reason for not having a (better) job, noted by 35% of working-age clients. In most cases, the disability or health problem is long-term rather than short-term.
- More than one-quarter of working-age clients mention a problem with either the availability of jobs or with their own level of skills, education, or experience.
- Eleven percent of working-age clients indicate that problems with finding or paying for childcare are a barrier to employment.
- Lack of transportation is also listed as an employment barrier by 11% of working-age clients.

### **Economic well-being**

- Food pantries serve a very low-income clientele. Almost one-quarter of clients report monthly household income below \$500, and more than three-quarters report income below \$1000. Only 5% report incomes over \$1500 per month.
- Almost one-quarter of pantry users indicate that someone in their household skipped meals in the past year because there was not enough food. This includes 4% of households in which a child skipped meals.
- Pantry users experience a variety of hardships in addition to insufficient access to food. During the 12 months prior to the survey, 9% of clients had their electricity cut off; 18% had their phone disconnected; 24% were unable to afford health care for either themselves or a child; and 18% had a housing-related problem, including eviction, homelessness, or sharing housing because of not being able to afford their own.
- Pantry clients range from infrequent users to users who receive food on a regular basis. Eighteen percent have not previously visited a pantry in the past year, and 21% have made 2-3 visits during the year. On the other hand, 27% have visited a pantry at least 10 times over the past year. Frequent pantry use is much more common among elderly clients than among the working-age.
- Despite low incomes, only 17% of pantry clients report receiving food stamps. Food stamp usage is higher in non-working households than households with an employed member (19% versus 14%); higher among the working age than the elderly (18% versus 13%); and higher among households with children than households with no children (20% versus 14%).

### **Single parents and public assistance**

- Single parents report fairly limited involvement with the W-2 program. 10% of single parents are current participants (cash or noncash), while 17% are past participants. In contrast, single parents report much higher participation in the old AFDC program: half have received AFDC, including one-third who last received AFDC in 1995 or later.
- One-quarter of the single parents currently receive food stamps.
- Approximately one-quarter of the single parents receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) on behalf of either an adult or a child, indicating high rates of disability in this population.
- Single parents who use food pantries have lower levels of economic well being than other working-age clients and elderly clients. Single parents report the lowest incomes and the highest rates of skipping meals and other hardships.