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## Upfront

### Working and Poor

Some families lack the purchasing power to eat well

By Melinda Sacks

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## THE SAFETY NET

# Working and Poor

*Some families lack the purchasing power to eat well*

A study published last year in the *Journal of Social Service Research* (vol. 28, no. 4) has found that one-third of the people who depend on food pantries and soup kitchens are in fact employed. Furthermore, the education and background characteristics of these working poor suggest that the earning potential of their households is very low, and long-term dependence upon food assistance is likely.

Sociologists Ann Nichols-Casebolt and Patricia McGrath Morris, from the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Social Work, randomly selected food pantries and soup kitchens in Virginia and surveyed 1,417 individuals who utilized these services between 1997 and 1999.

Given the fact that the economy was strong during the years of their study, and food stamps and other government programs were intended to fill the gaps for working families, the authors found it troubling that so many families were still finding it hard to feed themselves and pay other bills.

Their research sought to identify the characteristics and circumstances that led households with working family members to seek what is usually considered emergency food assistance from soup kitchens and pantries. They looked at the economic risks and hardships these families encountered, and the likelihood that they would continue to depend on emergency programs.

The authors found that the majority of their sample had characteristics that do not bode well for long-term self-sufficiency. For example, more

### Poor Prospects

A large percentage of employed soup kitchen clients can't make ends meet.

#### HOURS OF WORK PER WEEK

Less than 21 hours	24.7%
21-39 hours	38.4%
40+ hours	36.9%

#### HOURLY WAGE

Less than \$5.16	23.8%
\$5.16-\$6.50	34.8%
\$6.51-\$8.00	21.1%
\$8.01 or more	20.4%

than half of the households were run by adults without a high school diploma, one of the leading indicators of earning potential. Many were single parents, largely women, earning very low wages.

They also found that other hardships – housing and family situations, loss of public benefits, and disruption in utilities, for example – were more likely than current income to lead families to seek food assistance.

“Some of our speculation, particularly in relation to the hardships these families are experiencing, is that they are constantly making tradeoffs,” Nichols-Casebolt said. “They don’t have enough money to pay for everything the family needs. They can’t go to the ‘utilities bank,’ but they *can* go to the food bank. And [then] they can pay for utilities or get medicine, things they couldn’t do if they spent the money on food that week.”

In spite of their need, the authors found that more than two-thirds of those surveyed didn’t receive food stamps. This is powerful evidence for the fact that food stamps don’t provide an adequate safety net for the hungry. Previous studies have pointed out two reasons why eligible people don’t take advantage of the federal food stamp program: a lack of information about the program rules, and the complexity of applying compared to the perceived actual benefits.

To reduce dependency on emergency programs and increase use of the food stamp program, the authors recommended aggressive outreach to educate communities about available government services.

“For those of us who are social workers, what struck us was the idea that we could be doing outreach for food stamps at the food banks,” said Nichols-Casebolt.

Minimizing the paperwork and increasing hours at food stamp offices would also encourage participation.

The underlying problems the authors have identified with dependency on emergency programs, however, require broader, more long-term changes. They cite an increase in the minimum wage; enactment of living wage ordinances; and financial support for the transportation, healthcare, and child-care costs of low-income workers as important steps toward ensuring that American families “have the purchasing power to obtain an adequate diet.”

—Melinda Sacks