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**Abstract.** Increasing numbers of individuals in our community have been seeking local food pantry assistance. Previous studies of food pantries found that users show low rates of governmental aid receipt, especially in rural areas. We assessed evidence that suggests that post-recession need has mitigated rural reluctance to pursue government assistance. The inadequacy of government and local food assistance to address the problem of food insecurity in our community is discussed.

**Keywords:** food insecurity, food pantry, rural, safety net, stigma

Food insecurity is currently a reality for a substantial number of American families. Food insecurity as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the absence of sufficient food for a healthy and active lifestyle for all household members and consuming food that does not meet nutritional requirements (as cited in Greenberg, Greenberg, & Mazza, 2010). As a consequence, food pantries nationwide are experiencing an increase in the need for their services (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008; Garasky, Wright-Morton, & Greder, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2010).

Over the past three years, the local community food pantry in a small upper Great Plains community has experienced an increased utilization of its services. During that time, the number of people served by this food pantry increased from 1,661 in 2009 to 4,603 in 2012, an increase of more than 277%.

We searched the literature using terminology such as *emergency assistance*, *food pantry*, and *rural* and found few studies that dealt with rural food pantries and their users in Academic Search Premier, AgeLine, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and SocINDEX with Full Text. Even though rural communities have a higher poverty rate than urban and suburban communities (Rural Income, Poverty, and Welfare: Summary of Conditions and Trends, 2011), and anecdotal reports by nonprofit organizations indicate that food insecurity is an important problem in rural communities, some evidence suggests that there is a tendency for rural individuals to avoid food assistance. For example, Mabli, Cohen, Potter, and Zhao (2010) reported that 47.2% of the clients who participate in community-based food programs in the rural state of South Dakota did not apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Alternatives to government food programs can vary significantly between rural and urban areas with noncash subsistence (e.g., hunting, fishing, gardening, raising animals for food) quite prevalent in some rural communities (Sherman, 2009). Subsistence activities may serve, therefore, as a preferred means for meeting dietary needs in many rural communities. In her ethnography of a northern California rural community, Sherman found that her rural neighbors felt that utilizing safety net resources such as food stamps (now SNAP), TANF, and WIC were morally and socially unacceptable. The combination of subsistence alternatives and social stigma may have a compounding effect on the other evidence suggesting that non-participation in safety net programs among families eligible for food assistance is a growing problem in both rural and urban areas (Algert, Reibel, & Renvall, 2006; Garasky et al., 2004).

The juxtaposition of a 277% increase in one local food pantry usage with other findings of rural resident reluctance to utilize government assistance (Garasky et al., 2004; Mabli et al., 2010; Sherman, 2009) may suggest that there is less reluctance to seek economic assistance in this county following the 2008 Great Recession. To the extent that the lingering effects of the 2008 recession have increased the level of food insecurity in rural areas, the increase usage of the local food pantry may be accompanied by increased usage of government food assistance. This study attempts to replicate, in part, the pre-recession research conducted in 2002 by Garasky and colleagues (2004) to see if there is a significant difference between rural users of local food pantries, pre- and post-recession, as measured by participation in safety net programs.

### **Method**

We developed a 23-item instrument based on Garasky et al. (2004) in consultation with the manager of the local food pantry. After obtaining IRB approval, participation of eligible food pantry users was solicited during food pantry operations and respondents were entered into a drawing for one of four \$25 gift certificates. Identifying information was manually separated from the completed questionnaires to insure anonymity. No codes linking the identifying information to the completed questionnaires were maintained. We included two procedural questions to assist the management of the food pantry. These questions addressed confirmation of household income and compliance with food pantry procedures that require presentation of identification upon the receipt of food supplies.

The instrument was divided into four sections. The first section was procedural as mentioned above. The second section focused on food insecurity within the households of the participants using the short form of the 12 Month Food Security Scale (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). The third section focused on receipt of governmental assistance, use of the food pantry alone, and employment status. The last section was quantitative in nature and included questions related to demographics, such as age, family size, monthly income, education level, garden usage, and how many times the participants used the food pantry in the past year. The last two questions required short answers seeking reasons why participants did not apply or were denied food stamp (SNAP) benefits.

Student researchers administered the survey and were present at most times of operation (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday). Administration of the survey began in the second half of February 2012 and ended the first week of April 2012. Participation was voluntary and all participants were residents of the county served by the food pantry. The food pantry is the only such service within the county. The county's population is over 14,000 (33.3 persons per square mile). Completed surveys were received from 48 individuals representing households that included 124 individuals. The median age of respondents was 44.6 years ( $SD = 18.3$ ), and only 20.8% ( $n = 10$ ) respondents were 60 years of age or older. Slightly less than 30% of respondents ( $n = 13$ ) lived alone, and 15 respondents (32.6%) reported using the food pantry every month in the last year. Demographic characteristics are reported on Table 1.

Table 1

*Comparison of Pre- and Post-Recession Findings*

Variable	Iowa Study Pre-recession 2004	This Study Post-recession 2012
Number of Respondents	60	48
Age (years, SD)	49.0 (n/a)	44.6 (18.3)
Household Size (persons)	2.5 (n/a)	2.8 (1.8)
Monthly income (\$)	905.2 (n/a)	961.5 (825.4)
Less than high school education (%)	23.4	15.2 <sup>ns</sup>
Work at paid job (%)	27.1	37.5 <sup>ns</sup>
Food secure (%)	41.4	12.5 <sup>*</sup>
Food insecure without hunger (%)	22.5	31.3 <sup>ns</sup>
Food insecure with hunger (%)	36.2	56.3 <sup>ns</sup>
Have a garden (%)	32.0	16.7 <sup>ns</sup>
Have applied for food stamps (%)	n/a	78.2
Currently receiving food stamps (%)	27.1	60.4 <sup>*</sup>
Currently receiving WIC (%)	13.6	19.1 <sup>ns</sup>
Use of food pantry in last 12 months	4.6 (3.4)	6.3 (4.6) <sup>**</sup>

*Note.* The Iowa Study results are from “The Food Environment and Food Insecurity: Perceptions of Rural, Suburban, and Urban Food Pantry Clients in Iowa,” by S. Garasky, L. Wright-Morton, and K. Greder, 2004, *Family Economics and Nutrition Review*, 16(2), p. 43.  $-p < .001$ .  $** - p = .029$ . <sup>ns</sup> – not significant using Fishers’s exact test. n/a – data not available.

## Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM Statistics SPSS 20. As can be noted on Table 1, the rural sample collected in this study is roughly comparable to the data collected in the 2004 Iowa study (Garasky et al., 2004). Our respondents were younger than the Iowa sample (44.6 years to 49.0 years) and reported a higher frequency of obtaining a high school diploma (84.8% to 74.6%). The household size was higher in our sample (2.8 persons to 2.5 persons) and household monthly income was higher (\$961 to \$905); however, adjusted for inflation using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator ([http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm)), the income for the Iowa sample would be slightly higher at \$1,154 indicating that our respondents reported a lower purchasing power. Our sample also reported a higher rate of employment (37.5% to 27.1%). Garasky et al. (2004) did not report the variability associated with age, household size, and income, which prevented statistical comparison on these variables. Fischer's exact test found no significant difference in the frequency of high school completion or in the number of respondents who reported employment. Garasky et al.'s respondents reported nearly twice the utilization of gardening as a dietary supplement (32.0% to 16.7%).

Our sample was significantly different from the Iowa sample in three areas. Our sample was less likely to report food security (12.5% to 41.4%), more likely to report current receipt of food stamps or SNAP benefits (60.4% to 27.1%), and a higher frequency of use of the local food pantry (6.3 times to 4.6 times). Food provision through subsistence activities may explain the higher level of food security in Garasky et al.'s (2004) sample that reported nearly twice as many gardens as our sample. Garasky et al. did not report the percentage of their rural sample that had applied for food stamps, but over 78% of our respondents had done so. The difference between food stamp applications and beneficiaries in our study is partially explained by the 10 respondents (22.2%) whose applications had been denied.

## Discussion

As noted by Garasky and colleagues (2004), studies of food pantry users depict a snapshot of some of the most resource-stressed and vulnerable households in any given community. In this case, we compared small, nonprobability samples of rural food pantry clients before ( $n = 60$ ) and after ( $n = 48$ ) the 2008 Great Recession. Findings indicate a clear distinction between these snapshots with the post-recession sample reporting significantly lower levels of food security, significantly higher levels of food stamp usage, and a significantly higher reliance on the food pantry over the last 12 months. We consider it meaningful that food security is significantly lower even with a higher participation in the use of food stamps and higher food pantry utilization. We conclude that government assistance programs are not adequate to address the issue of food insecurity in rural America whether that inadequacy stems from the level of benefits available, the eligibility criteria, or both. We also note that these findings are consistent with a decline in the stigma associated with public food assistance in rural areas following the recession and consider this suggestive that elevation of need may be a mitigating factor for stigma.

Our study coincides with the findings of Berner et al. (2008) who found that the receipt of food stamps more than doubles the odds of needing long-term nonprofit food assistance. This further suggests the inadequacy of safety net programs, as non-profit agencies do not receive

sufficient public financial assistance to alleviate food insecurity. The local food pantry participating in our study dramatically illustrates the inadequacy of public government assistance as it has operated for 34 years relying solely on the donations of local businesses and residents. Our study along with past research suggests that the problem of hunger in America is dramatic, and is in desperate need of a swift and comprehensive solution.

Following Garasky et al. (2004), we support a national food policy focusing on increasing participation in SNAP programs and expanding eligibility criteria to include a larger segment of low income rural residents. All of the respondents in our study reported a household income under 185% of the federal poverty level and over 78.2% reported having applied for food stamps, but only 60.4% were receiving food stamp benefits. Accordingly, we believe increasing participation must include recruitment and training of local food pantry personnel to educate food pantry clients on food assistance eligibility and the application process.

Our participants reported a relatively high rate of rejection (22.2%) in prior applications for food benefits which raises questions about how well-informed the food pantry clientele are about the application/eligibility process for food assistance. Food pantries appear to be an excellent avenue by which to contact those with a history of food assistance denial and may be a good place from which to distribute accurate and current information about this important federal food program. We did not collect any information from our participants regarding their perception of the helpfulness of our local public welfare facility or other community advocates they may have consulted.

There were significant limitations in our study. The external validity is problematic in that our sample size is small and participants are from one small rural county in an upper Great Plains state. Consequently, our results cannot be generalized to all food pantry users in other rural areas, or nationwide. With regard to generalizability, we are particularly concerned with the inadequate controls in our study to measure the degree of food provision through subsistence activities. Furthermore, the quality of food pantry users' responses may pose a threat to the study's internal validity. Food pantry clients' responses to open-ended questions did suggest a variation in the literacy levels of the participants. The setting for data collection at the food pantry site may have influenced responses, as participants may have answered based upon socially acceptable values and beliefs. Despite efforts to avoid respondent discomfort by vacating the room when questionnaires were being completed, a power imbalance between food pantry clients and the food pantry personnel/student researchers may have influenced participation. Food pantry users tended over time to develop a trusting relationship with food pantry staff, but there was significant variation in staff support for this project. Staff that acquired knowledge of the importance of the study were more apt to influence users' willingness to participate which could also have influenced responses and participation. Any interpretation of our findings should be made with an awareness of the possibility of bias in respondents' answers.

We conclude affirming the position held by Greenberg and his colleagues (2010), where they suggest that "elected officials and agency staff are responsible for assessing the reality and developing appropriate policies, rather than bowing to politically convenient slogans for ignoring the poor" (p. 2022). Alleviation of the stress associated with food insecurity calls for aggressive government monitoring and response. Food insecurity in rural America is a problem that can be solved and must be solved.

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