

# Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple

## Preliminary Findings

### **Food Assistance Shifts from “Emergency” To “Chronic”**

As economic times change, so does the use of food banks and their agencies. What was previously an emergency network created to provide food to people in short-term need has become a regular part of the coping mechanisms people employ to access enough food. In the new “Food Banks: Hunger’s New Staple” study, Feeding America research suggests that food from pantries is not just being used to meet temporary acute food needs – instead, for the majority of people seeking food assistance, pantries are now a part of households’ long term strategies to supplement monthly shortfalls in food.

The findings also illuminate the critical role that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called the Food Stamp Program) plays in helping alleviate the country’s struggle with hunger and suggest that those benefits do not go far enough.

The first food bank, St. Mary’s Food Bank Alliance in Arizona, was established in 1967 as a way to ensure that food was available to people who may have experienced a short-term crisis. At that time, food banks were truly meant as an emergency source of food. Against the economic backdrop of high unemployment and rising poverty, Feeding America member food banks have been reporting anecdotally that many clients are no longer coming to their pantries only in emergency situations. Instead, food assistance has become a new staple for many people – people who are using pantries and agencies regularly to make it through the month. This report, for the first time, solidifies what we have heard.

### **Background**

The guiding analysis plan for this study involved the use of a pantry frequency question asked of clients surveyed for the *Hunger in America 2010* project. *Hunger in America 2010* is the largest study of domestic emergency food assistance, providing comprehensive and statistically-valid data on the emergency food distribution system and the people Feeding America serves. The study draws on data from more than 61,000 interviews with clients and surveys of 37,000 feeding agencies.



*Hunger in America 2010* details the increase in food assistance needs across the nation, indicating a 46 percent increase in the number of people served by Feeding America food banks since 2006 alone. Current statistics from other sources also point to rising need for food assistance since the start of The Great Recession – in 2010, 49 million Americans were at risk of hunger.<sup>1</sup> With unemployment rates at historically high levels and the large proportion of our nation’s households living in poverty, the need for further analysis of patterns of food pantry use can help us understand this phenomenon more fully.

Categories for frequency of use were based on one question posed to clients during the data collection period for *Hunger in America 2010* (late winter and early spring of 2009). This question reads: **“Now thinking about the past year, did you or anyone in your household use a pantry...”**

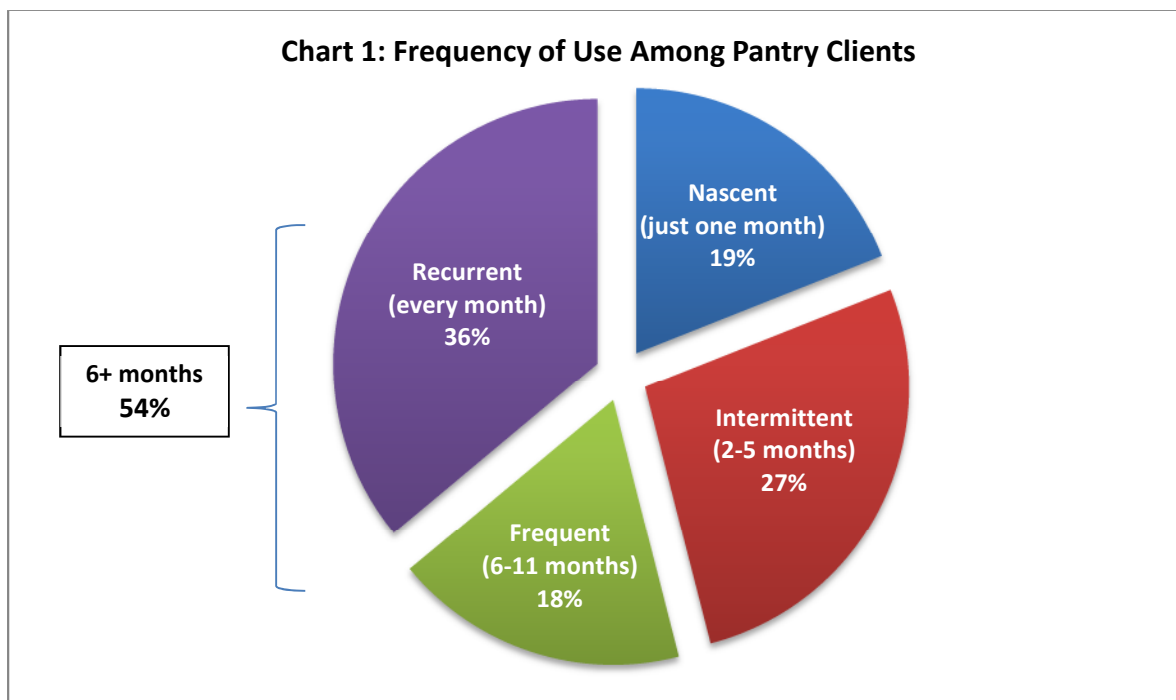
- **Nascent** All respondents who answered "just this month".
- **Intermittent** Clients who responded to the following two categories: “just a few months (2-3 months)” or “some months (4-5 months)”.
- **Frequent** Clients who responded to the following two categories: “most months (6-9 months)” or “almost every month (10-11 months)”.
- **Recurrent** All respondents who answered “Every month (12 months)”.

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2010*.

## Key Preliminary Findings

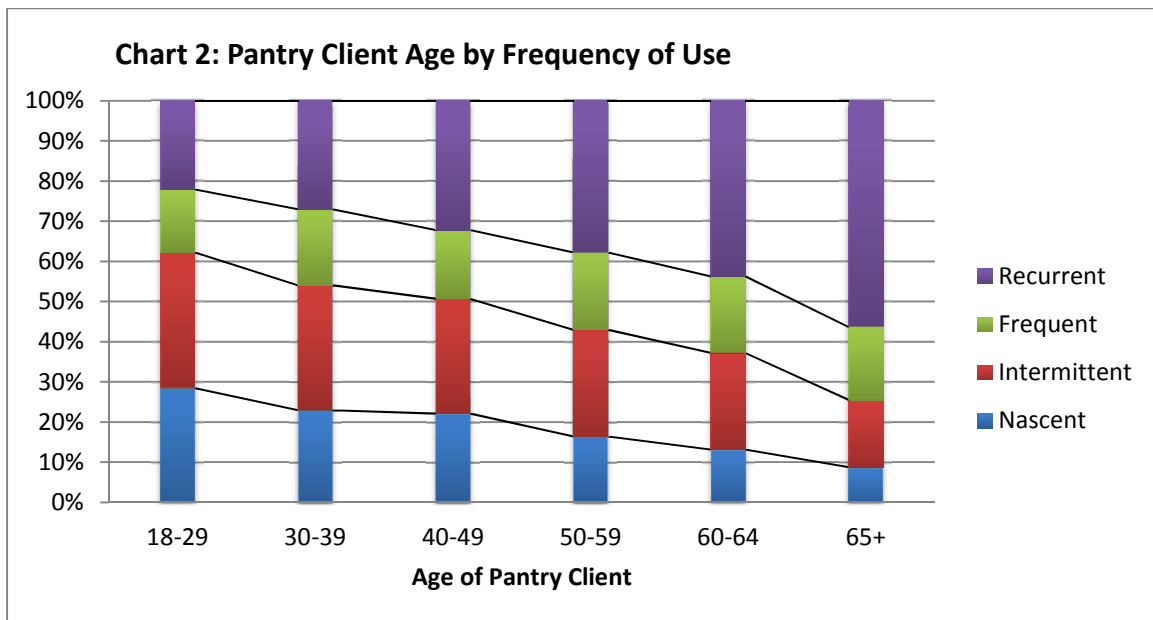
**From Emergency to Chronic:** Emergency food from pantries is no longer being used to meet temporary, acute food needs. Pantries are now a part of households' long term strategies to supplement monthly shortfalls in food.



- 54 percent of clients have visited a food pantry for at least six months or more during 2008.
- Over one third of all clients (36 percent) report having visited a food pantry at least every month in the year prior to data collection. These clients also report that they visited a food pantry for more than 28 consecutive months, on average.
- Average consecutive months of visiting a food pantry for each client group are:
  - Nascent (1.1 months)
  - Intermittent (5.1 months)
  - Frequent (13.7 months)
  - Recurrent (28.3 months)

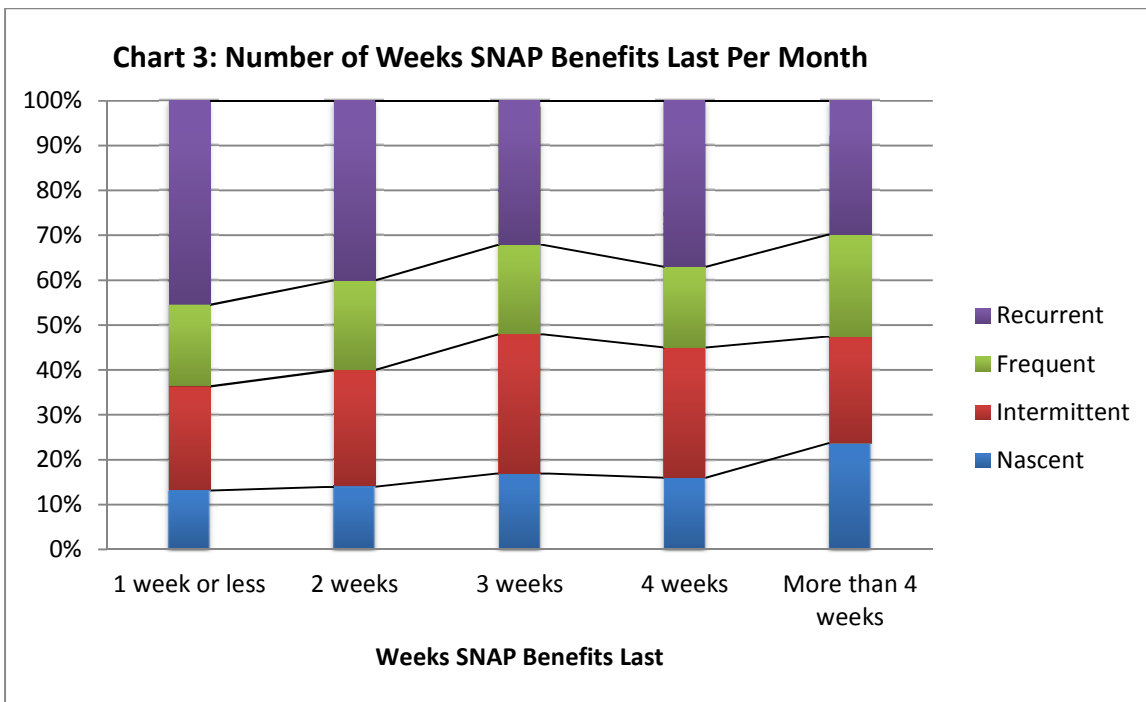
**Seniors:** Among older persons (65 and over), over half (56 percent) are recurrent pantry clients and have visited a pantry at least every month within the prior year, suggesting that the fixed incomes of the elderly may be insufficient to provide for basic needs.

- One out of three recurrent clients are age 60+ (33 percent) as compared to 23 percent overall.
- Fewer than 1 in 10 senior clients age 65+ (9 percent) are new/nascent compared to 19 percent of all clients.



**SNAP Usage:** Clients enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program need additional help from our food banks, suggesting that SNAP benefits do not go far enough in helping families meet their basic nutritional needs.

- Among clients currently receiving SNAP benefits, over half (58 percent) are recurrent or frequent clients.
- The shorter the amount of time that clients' benefits last throughout the month, the more likely a client is to visit a pantry every month. This speaks to the use of food pantries as a coping strategy for many clients who are receiving limited SNAP benefits or who simply can't make ends meet with existing resources.



Households that are food secure are more likely to be recurrent clients than other types of households. Although we cannot state this relationship to be causal in nature, it is preliminary evidence that food pantry use over longer durations may lower the likelihood of food insecurity.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

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