

Issue Brief

Hunger in the Heartland: A Portrait of Need in Northeast Iowa

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Iowa Fiscal Partnership

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Introduction: An In-Depth Look at Iowans and Hunger

Hunger is a serious problem in America – even in its heartland. The statistics from Iowa alone are impressive¹:

- ***Over 9 percent of Iowans are food insecure. Three percent suffer hunger.***
- More than 100,000 Iowa children and 100,000 Iowa adults receive government food assistance each year.
- Nonprofit food banks serving Iowans distributed over **10 million** pounds of food in the past year.
- Demand at northeast Iowa's largest food pantry **has doubled** in the last four years alone.

What does it mean to be hungry in Iowa? This report presents a picture gleaned from surveys of over 1,000 men and women, young and old, who requested and received free food from the Cedar Valley Food Pantry in Waterloo, Iowa.

These people, referred to as “clients” at the Pantry for the balance of this report, were surveyed from July 2004 through mid-April 2005. To understand how food pantries meet a need for food assistance, we also interviewed directors or staff from over 35 food pantries across northeast Iowa that are members of the Northeast Iowa Food Bank system. Alongside government programs, these pantries are the front line in the battle against hunger.

The staff of pantries and the people seeking help from them are the face of the need and response to hunger. This study included visits to numerous pantries, day cares, senior centers and other social service agencies to better understand how hunger could be a problem in the middle of the some of the richest agricultural land in the world. Instead of finding abject “hunger,” these visits found people of modest means who appreciated a little extra help getting by.

What is hunger?

By ***hunger***, people refer to “the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, which can lead to malnutrition over time.”

Food insecurity refers to the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. Other researchers have referred to this as not having enough food to live active, healthy lives.

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Background

One in 10 households in the United States is food insecure.² When speaking of “hunger,” people are referring to “the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, which can lead to malnutrition over time.”³ Another description, “food insecurity,” refers to a lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. Other researchers have referred to this as not having enough food to live active, healthy lives.⁴ For the past 40 years, government and non-profits have shared responsibility for providing food and nutrition assistance to the hungry.

A survey in 2000 found that one-half of food-insecure households in the United States participated in at least one of the three largest Federal Food Assistance programs in the previous month, and about 17 percent – 2.4 percent of all U.S. households – obtained emergency food from a food pantry at some time during the year.⁵ By 2003, the percentages had increased to 56 percent of all food-insecure households receiving assistance via one of the three largest federal programs, and 20 percent of food-insecure households – 3.1 percent of all U.S. households – obtaining emergency food from a nonprofit during the year.⁶

On the nonprofit side, a 2001 national survey of emergency feeding programs (EFPs) by a national organization, America’s Second Harvest, found that its food bank network of emergency food providers served “23 million people in a year (9 percent more than were served in 1997), and more than 9 million of those served were children. Nearly two-thirds of adult emergency food recipients were women, and more than one in five were elderly.”⁷

At the Pantry

In one pantry in a rural town in far Northeast Iowa on a recent Saturday morning, there was not a discussion of Food Stamp policy, farm subsidies or poverty statistics.

The pantry was located on the edge of town, next to a mobile home park. There were three volunteers, two older women and one man, all stooped with age and moving slowly. Two young women, teenagers completing a service project for a high school class, showed up for an hour to help pack boxes.

The group unpacked large boxes of cereal, canned food, crackers, cookies and other packaged items, putting the items in groups on shelves. Volunteers would then prepare boxes with a variety of items.

Clients filtered in throughout the morning, receiving a box pre-packed for a one-, two-, three-, or sometimes five-, six-, seven-member family. The older volunteers generally knew the clients by name.

A younger woman with long, straight light brown hair pulled up in an older blue pickup truck. She came in with a toddler – a girl in pale pink ski pants to protect against the unusual spring cold. The volunteers played with the girl, complimenting her on her smile while she tried to hide behind her mother’s legs.

The woman’s fiancé was working full time on a local farm raising pigs, but that wasn’t enough to support the family of five. The older man helped the mother out to the back of the truck with two boxes of food. The boxes were secured because she lived on gravel roads several miles into the country.

As she left, one of the ladies asked the mother if she needed any children’s cold medicine – they had some extra at the pantry. The mother nodded, took the small box, thanked the older woman and stepped outside with her daughter.

Common EFPs are food pantries, which distribute free food and grocery items or soup kitchens and shelters, which provide meals on-site. In addition, child-care centers, senior centers, nursing homes and other community programs receive food assistance to provide meals and snacks or further distribute food. Where do EFPs get the food? Some food comes through direct donations, but more commonly they receive assistance through food banks. Food banks are generally community-centered warehouses that solicit, store and distribute food from local producers, retail food centers, the federal Commodity Distribution program, and the food industry.⁷ Food banks distribute the surplus food to EFPs, which can be street-level organizations, both religious and nonreligious charities. Beyond food, financing for the food banks and EFPs comes from direct donations and government support, including local government support.⁸ Both food banks and EFPs rely heavily on volunteers.

Understanding Iowa's 'Food Insecure' Population

What are the characteristics of Iowans who benefit from food assistance? The Cedar Valley Food Pantry is the largest food pantry in northeast Iowa, serving almost 1,000 households each month. We surveyed these clients to have a better understanding of their needs. This report presents the results of that survey.

Clients at the Cedar Valley Food Pantry are categorized as emergency or supplemental clients. Up to the third visit in a single month, a person needing services is considered an emergency client. After that, such clients are considered to be in a situation where they need assistance on a more regular basis, usually to supplement other sources of income or types of public assistance. We compare data for these two types of clients throughout this report.

From early July 2004 to mid-April 2005, 750 emergency clients who received services completed a survey. Starting in September, supplemental clients also were asked to fill out a survey. As of mid-April, 456 supplemental clients responded. In total 1,206 clients were surveyed.

As seen in Table 1, many clients had some sort of government support. We focused on Social Security, Food Stamps and welfare (called Family Investment Program, or FIP, in Iowa) since they are the most common forms of government assistance.

Table 1. Clients Reporting Receipt of Government Support

Program	Emergency		Supplemental		All Clients	
	Number	Percent of all Emergency clients	Number	Percent of all Supplemental clients	Number	Percent of all Clients
Social Security	114	17	146	34	260	24
FIP (welfare)	62	10	53	13	115	11
Food Stamps	191	30	248	57	439	41
Total having at least one type of support	264	41	305	70	569	53
Total having more than one type of support	92	14	126	29	218	20

Respondents could indicate more than one type of additional support.

Voices of People in Crisis

Sixty-one percent of emergency clients, or those who were using a pantry for up to three times in a single month, were facing some sort of crisis in their lives. In the survey, those clients were asked what type of crisis they were experiencing. Some examples painted a picture of living on the edge – with a loss of employment cited most often. (See Table 2, and accompanying quotes.)

By definition, supplemental clients at some point used the pantry up to three times in a month, which moves them from emergency status. When asked how often they receive a food box from the pantry, less than half of the supplemental clients responded. Of those, 68 percent said they now usually come one or two times a year, while over 5 percent said they come more than nine times a year.

Other characteristics of clients:

- Fifty-eight people, or 8 percent of all emergency clients, are veterans. (Veteran status is not asked of supplemental clients.)
- Of all the clients, 100 people, or about 8 percent, have a special food need, and those were almost all diabetics.
- Twenty-five percent are employed, commonly at local manufacturing, fast-food restaurants or retail stores.
- Of those out of work who reported having a former employer, a variety of companies were cited, from day cares to fast food to local industry.

Living on the edge

Table 2. Type of Crisis Facing Emergency Clients

Type of Crisis*	Number	Percent
Fire	15	2
Loss of Job	199	31
Family Death	15	2
Recent Release from Prison	15	2
Change in Domestic Relationship, Housing Situation or Homeless	46	6
Just moved to area	43	6
Health Issues	60	8
General Financial Hardship**	103	14

*emergency clients only
**includes loss of financial support from family or spouse
Respondents could choose more than one response.

Causes of Crisis

“Staying with family, going through divorce, and hours have been cut in last 2-3 weeks.”

“Not enough Food Stamps”

“Husband left”

“My son ... was killed”

“Breast cancer”

“Kidney transplant surgery”

“Leaving an abusive relationship”

“Paperwork for Food Stamps not complete”

“Loss of home to foreclosure, had to move”

“Moving to a new house and started a new job”

“Year of chemotherapy for daughter, not able to work”

“Father of children has stopped paying child support”

“I work at ..., no work over holidays”

“Full time student, part-time work, no child support or any other help”

“Heart attack”

“Have not worked in three weeks”

“Just moved to Waterloo, just found employment”

“Disabled vet waiting on VA pension”

“Just moved to Waterloo”

“Plant shut down”

“Off work due to pregnancy”

“Ran out of (baby) formula”

Table 3. Veterans, Special Food Need or Employment of Clients

	Emergency		Supplemental		All Clients	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Veterans	58	8	*	*	*	*
Special Food Need	57	8	43	9	100	8
Employed	194	26	106	23	300	25

* Not asked.

What other financial pressures exist for these clients? A large number of clients reported they had to forgo food for some other important item. Table 4 illustrates other financial pressures on food pantry clients, with shelter costs at the top of the list for both emergency and supplemental clients – almost half citing rent or mortgage and about 4 in 10 citing utility bills. About 1 in 5

Table 4. Other Financial Pressures for Clients

	Emergency		Supplemental		All Clients	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Prescriptions	158	21	125	27	283	23
Rent/Mortgage	366	49	210	46	576	48
Unexpected Expense	104	14	127	28	231	19
Utilities	276	37	181	41	463	38
Medical Bills	135	18	76	17	211	18
Clothing	125	17	89	20	214	18
Kids School Expenses	102	14	62	14	164	14
Other	137	18	64	14	201	17

Totals do not round to 100 percent, as clients could report more than one other financial pressure.

cited prescriptions, medical bills or clothing expenses – or an unexpected expense – putting pressures on their budgets.

Starting in October, we asked what the living situation was for all clients. The results of the first 1,206 clients’ responses (shown in Figure 1 at right) indicate the majority rented their living space.

When broken down by emergency or supplemental client, the percentages were similar, as shown in Table 5 on page 6.

Figure 1. Living Situation for Clients

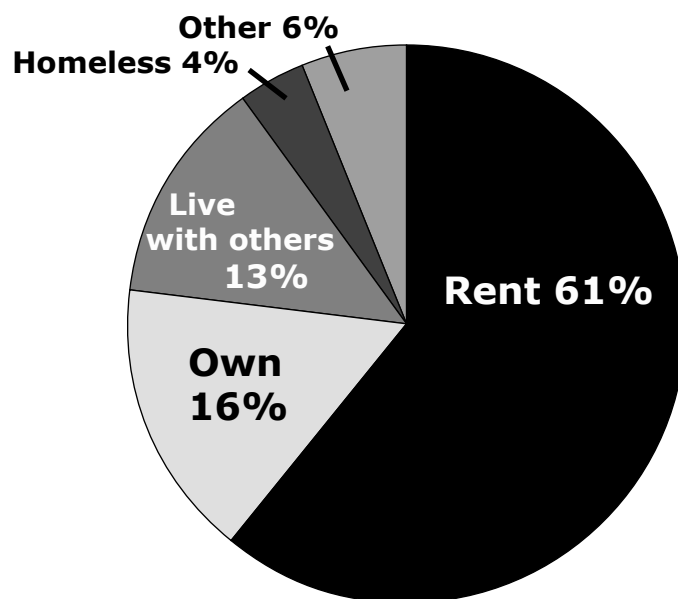


Table 5. Housing Situation, by Type of Client

Housing	Emergency		Supplemental		All Clients	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Rent	267	62	217	61	484	61
Own	60	14	70	20	130	17
Live with Others	59	14	43	12	102	13
Homeless	18	4	10	3	28	4
Other	27	6	17	5	44	6

Survey of Agency Directors

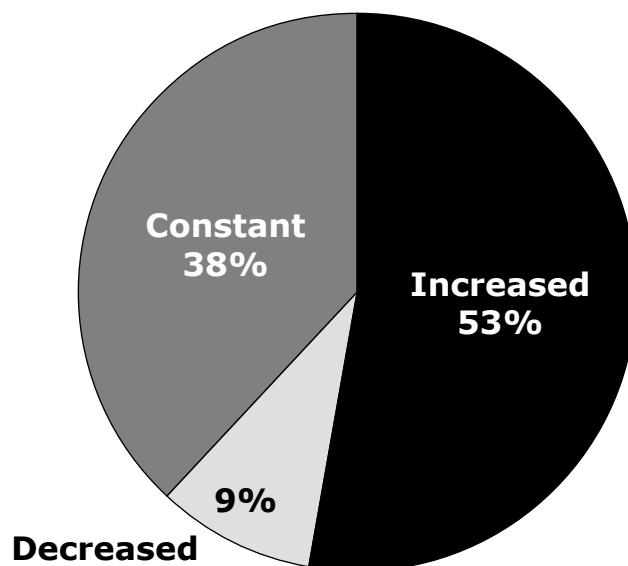
The Cedar Valley Food Pantry has seen dramatic increases in the number of clients seeking help over the past several years. In fact, according to the director of the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, Barbara Prather, demand at the pantry has nearly doubled in the last four years. The pantry served an average of 531 clients per month in fiscal year 2000-01, and 992 per month in FY2004-05. Is this unusual? What is happening at other food pantries? To answer this question, we surveyed all the other food pantries that receive bulk food from the Northeast Iowa Food Bank. These pantries are large and small, representing communitywide efforts to individual churches or unions serving their own members. The results create an impression of increased need, increased pressure, and an increase in families needing long-term assistance.

On average, the pantries serve about 50 households per month. However, that average hides a wide range of responses. Seven agencies serve fewer than 10 households, 15 serve between 10 and 49 households each month, and seven serve between 50 and 100. Four serve over 100 households each month – two of those serving over 300 households.

We asked if agency directors felt demand for food from their pantry had increased, decreased or remained constant over the previous year. (See Figure 2.)

What is the cause of this demand? If it is from emergency clients, the implications for the nonprofits, churches, community centers, etc. may be short-term. An emergency such as a plant closing or a temporary layoff may increase demand for help, the nonprofits can adjust, and the crisis will pass. However, if the demand is from clients coming back for food month after month, the implications are much more worrisome. An increase in client demand means a need to increase the base capacity of the service agencies.

Figure 2. Perceptions of Pantry Directors on Trend of Demand for Food



We asked agency directors to distinguish between emergency and supplemental clients as done by the Cedar Valley Food Pantry, emergency being first-timers up to their third visit in a month, supplemental being those who come on a more regular basis, who tend to supplement other sources with food pantry goods. We then asked about the composition of their client base – whether it was made up of more emergency or supplemental clients. On average, pantries had more “regulars,” as many directors described supplemental clients, than emergency clients. (See Figure 3.)

We then asked if the crisis and/or supplemental populations had increased, decreased or remained constant. As seen in Figure 4, for both crisis and supplemental clients, the population was constant or increasing. Very few pantries felt they were experiencing a decline in demand for food assistance.

Figure 3. Average Estimated Composition of Pantry Clients

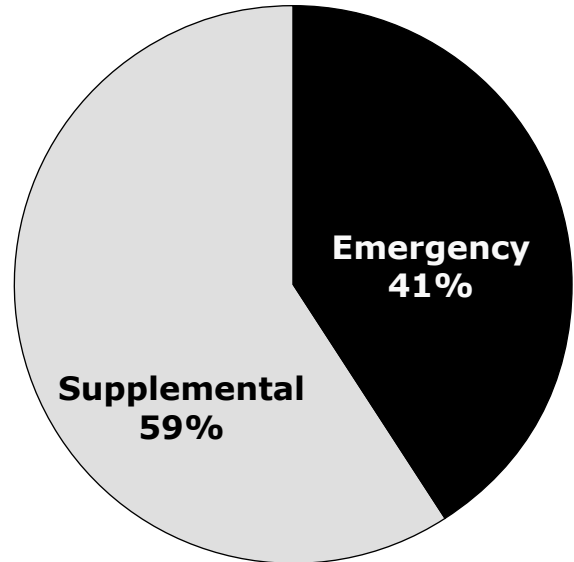
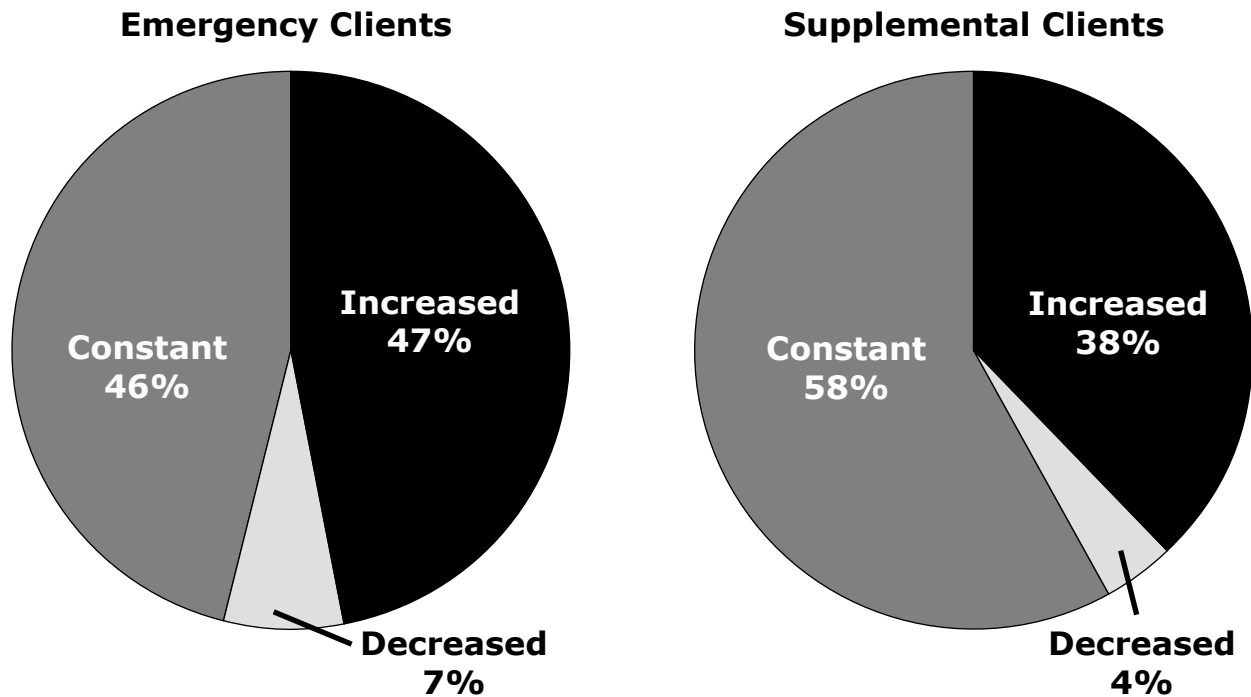


Figure 4. Perceptions of Pantry Directors on Trend in Demand for Food



Agency staff reported that demand came primarily from crisis clients in 11 cases, from supplemental clients in eight cases, and from both in two cases. If demand had increased, why? Usually, agency staff were unable to say. In a few of the crisis cases, staff blamed the economy. For supplemental clients, there were some similar responses related to the economy, but there

was also a sense of increased demand coming from increased outreach. Some staff responses from both types of situations were:

- “Not sure. Work-related injuries, disabled, electrical rates went up and now they can’t make the budget.”
- “Just the economy, working on minimum wages-hard to survive”
- “Economy deteriorating, outsourcing, more (families) going to the facility”
- “Economic situation and family situation”
- “Knowing that we are here”
- “Higher commitment from staff for building strong relationships...”
- “Advertising, volunteer outreach...”

What Happens to the Crisis Clients?

We asked directors if they could estimate how many of the crisis clients became supplemental clients. There was a dramatic difference in responses to this question. Seven pantry directors believed that few households became regular clients who used the pantry as a supplement to their monthly regular food source. However, two felt that a third of their clients became regulars, and it appeared to staff at nine pantries that most of the emergency clients ended up relying on the pantry as a regular food source. In the latter locations, the short-termers generally become long-termers.

Conclusion

The survey of clients and agencies has led us to five important conclusions:

- There are as many, and likely more, people using food pantries in Iowa than in the past.
- The increase in demand reflects both emergency and chronic need: people needing short-term help and people needing long-term help.
- Government programs are not sufficient. Many people seeking nonprofit food assistance are already receiving some form of government assistance.
- Cuts in government programs will only increase demand on the nonprofit sector. The hungry will not go away. Federal cuts in services such as Food Stamps would shift the problem from the federal level primarily to local nonprofits.

This study does not address the capacity to handle dramatic increases in demand for food assistance, but previous research has found an inability of local nonprofits to do so elsewhere in the country.¹⁰

Trends in demand for food assistance place pressure on the Food Stamp Program and other government services as well as nonprofit operations. As currently configured, this web of services provides a safety net that depends on all parts to meet the various needs of the hungry in Iowa. Proposals in Washington, D.C., to reduce federal food assistance services imply that the need will be met another way. Cutting Food Stamps or other government food assistance inevitably would shift the burden to those with less stable resources and capacity – local nonprofits. Congress should not cut food assistance without knowing that the private sector can do more.

Sources

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Methodology

Client Survey

Beginning in July 2004, all emergency clients of the Cedar Valley Food Pantry were asked to fill out a written questionnaire so that the pantry could better report the nature of the clientele to potential funders. Clients did not have to complete the survey for service, although most did the first time requested. Supplemental clients were added beginning in September 2004. This report includes the results of the surveys as of mid-April 2005. The Cedar Valley Food Pantry is continuing to gather surveys.

The statistics reported here are descriptive. Since a full population was surveyed, sampling and confidence issues are not a concern. Only a very small portion of emergency clients, estimated to be less than 5 percent, refused to respond to the survey. As clients returned to the food pantry, they were asked to fill out the survey again. Because some clients returned often and moved from being an emergency client to a supplemental client, the refusal rate climbed for the supplemental surveys. Pantry staff estimate refusal rates to be 25-50 percent for supplemental clients. An additional small portion of both emergency and supplemental clients, again estimated at less than 5 percent, could not be included due to unintelligible responses. Non-response issues may be a problem for the supplemental survey results, but pantry staff did not feel there was a significant difference between those who would respond and not respond. Staff felt the primary reason for refusal was the client had already completed a similar survey for the pantry in the previous months. This is why the final survey tally is smaller than monthly caseload for the pantry.

The survey was developed by a team comprised of faculty and graduate students from the University of Northern Iowa and staff of the Northeast Iowa Food Bank. It was pre-tested for a week, with pantry clients, with no significant revisions on review. The data reported here represent all surveys, including the pretests.

Survey of Pantry Directors

Also, beginning in July 2004, the directors of all food pantry members of the Northeast Iowa Food Bank were interviewed in person, at the agency, by UNI faculty, graduate students and Food Bank staff. These interviews were conducted as part of the regular bi-annual site visits from Food Bank staff. The questions focused on their perceptions, rather than quantitative data from agency records. We requested interviews with the agency director or the most appropriate staff person available. With the exception of several agencies where no one was available, almost all (37) agencies participated. The exceptions were usually very small operations in some form of personnel transition, such as a new volunteer with no historical knowledge taking over a church food pantry.

In all cases, if answers were given as a range, to calculate averages, a mid-point of the range was used. The source for all figures and tables is the author's survey. Full survey results are available from the author. Contact the Iowa Policy Project: ipp@lcom.net, or (319) 338-0773.

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