

Masthead

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The hunger for food aid

The news reports are relentless, from every part of the country. This month, the Courier in Waterloo, Iowa, reported "Northeast Iowa food bank demand quadrupled since 2006." In Boston, it was "Study finds food pantry use soaring in Massachusetts."

In North Carolina, the story was the same. From the Asheville Citizen-Times: "Report: In WNC, 1 in 6 used food pantries in 2009" and from the Winston-Salem Journal, "Area food bank reports significant increase in requests for assistance."

These headlines capture our attention for the moment, but the data behind them are misleading. Yes, there have been increases in the number of people seeking help or in the pounds of food going out the door. What we don't realize is that although the trend might have picked up lately, these figures are a continuation of steady increases in food pantry use for more than a decade.

More troubling is that all of these numbers are a dramatic underestimate of the problem. The problem of hunger in North Carolina is actually much worse.

Tracking demand for food assistance outside of government programs such as food stamps is notoriously hard. Nonprofit food assistance is provided in church basements, through meals at senior centers, in unmarked kids' backpacks given out on Friday afternoons in schools, in thousands of different organizations in our state, all supported primarily by a huge volunteer force. Some organizations refuse to track the number of clients for fear of creating an unintended barrier for those seeking help. Others lack the capacity to collect, store and analyze the data.

And simply recording the number of people served belies the real issue: Despite the headlines, counts are not a measure of need.

We have been tracking the history of food assistance in central and Eastern North Carolina. After five years of research, it is clear that nonprofit food assistance is a supply-driven good. That is, usage has increased primarily as a function of capacity of supply, not of increases in demand.

In traditional markets, businesses increase supply in order to meet demand. If you want to buy a box of your favorite cereal, it's rare that you would walk into your local supermarket and find it missing from the shelves. As a result, if 2,000 boxes of cereal are sold at a given store, researchers and government officials can confidently say that this represents the demand for cereal at that location.

At nonprofit food assistance centers, however, the demand is rarely if ever met. As a result, it's impossible to use food distributed as a measure of demand. The true demand far exceeds what it is ever given out. Statistics that use food distributed are consistently underestimating the need.

Two examples illustrate this pattern. Monthly client records for a small pantry in rural North Carolina show a steady number of clients for years - about 35 people each week. When we visited to observe the pantry in action, a volunteer counted up to 35 people and then closed the door. That was all the pantry could support. No other people were helped until the next week. That pattern repeats every time the door is opened.

In Eastern North Carolina, emergency pantries were opened in several towns in response to Hurricane Floyd

in 1999. They have never closed. One now reports feeding up to 500 people a week.

Like many small community nonprofits, food pantries have been constrained by lack of trained staff, computers, space and equipment, but they are facing a much larger problem: lack of product. They are running out of food to give away, on a national scale.

Food that used to go to food banks is now on the shelves of dollar stores and Wal-Mart. Prepared foods, popular in grocery stores everywhere, cannot be recycled to a pantry open one day a week or, at least, not easily. Our corporations are becoming so efficient that mislabeled cereal boxes are a thing of the past. Efforts like Boy and Girl Scout food drives help, but they can't provide the 2 billion pounds of food distributed nationally through nonprofits each year.

As we try to address the "drivers" of increasing demand, we should also look to being able to feed those making it in the door now, and keeping the door open enough to let in all those who are hungry. We need to improve the capacity of government and volunteer organizations to meet this need. We need to help those who are helping the hungry in our communities. If we can supply it, they will come.

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