

# Dependency on Soup Kitchens in Urban Areas of New York State

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**Abstract:** We studied the dependency of persons on soup kitchens in Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Westchester County, New York. Seventeen percent of the meal recipients were homeless, 62 percent lived in apartments or houses, 20 percent were working, 40 percent were women, and 17 percent had a child in their household. Fifty-nine percent started eating at the soup kitchen more than a year ago, and 51 percent ate five or more meals at soup

kitchens in the last week. Most reported they came to the soup kitchen because of economic problems or lack of food; 93 percent had incomes below the poverty threshold. Most used some government food program; 48 percent received food stamps. Utilization of soup kitchens and other programs differed between men and women and between households with and without children. (*Am J Public Health* 1990; 80:57-60.)

## Introduction

The number of meals served by a national sample of private emergency food programs increased by 21 percent from 1983 to 1984 and by 17 percent from 1984 to 1985.<sup>1</sup> In New York State, other than New York City, the estimated number of meals served monthly at soup kitchens was 204,334 in 1987;\* this represents an increase from estimates for 1985 and 1986.<sup>2</sup> Other reports have documented the increased use of emergency food programs, discussed possible causes for it, and recommended policies to address the food needs of the users of emergency food programs.<sup>3-6</sup> However, there is little information about the people who are dependent on these programs.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- What were the characteristics of persons dependent on soup kitchens in five urban areas of New York State outside of New York City?
- What was the extent of and reasons for their dependency on soup kitchens?
- What other food programs did they use?
- What were their perceived needs for health and other services?
- Were there differences in the patterns of dependency between men and women and between meal recipients who lived in households with and without a child?

## Methods

### Selection of Sample

In 1987 a survey was conducted of soup kitchens that served meals to the public during April in Albany, Buffalo, and Westchester County, and during October in Rochester and Syracuse. Of the 34 soup kitchens in these urban areas, 28 participated in the study.

It was not possible to take a random selection of guests from the sites because the total number of unduplicated guests who ate meals at the sites was not available. However, since the total number of meals served by the sites was

available, meals were sampled, and the soup kitchen guests served those meals were interviewed. Because meals were sampled, guests who ate more meals at soup kitchens than others had a greater likelihood of being interviewed.

The goal was to select 20 meals at each site. An average of 17.9 meals were selected per site. Because an earlier study<sup>7</sup> found that soup kitchens served a greater number of meals at the end of the month, more meals (70 percent) were selected from the last half of the month.

A variety of mealtimes for interviewing guests was selected, and at each selected mealtime, the recipients of two or three randomly selected meals were interviewed. If the recipient was a child, the accompanying adult was interviewed. If a recipient refused to be interviewed, or if someone in his or her household had already been interviewed, the person next to that individual or the recipient of the next randomly selected meal was interviewed. Of the 501 soup kitchen guests interviewed, 87 percent were the recipients of the original randomly chosen meals.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The guests were asked a series of primarily closed-ended questions about their demographic characteristics, household composition, sources and amounts of household income, use of health services, and use of other food programs. Each interview took about 25 minutes.

Unweighted frequency tables were created from the sample data and the chi-square statistic applied.<sup>8</sup> For the frequencies and means of the distribution of single variables, combined urban estimates were calculated from the sample data by combining site estimates so as to weight for the number of meals served in each site and in each urban area, assuming that the guests at nonparticipating soup kitchens were similar to those at participating soup kitchens. The combined urban estimates represent the monthly total of soup kitchen meals (82,449) served in the five urban areas.

To estimate variances and standard errors, and to study the implications of varying sampling designs, the betabinomial distribution<sup>9,10</sup> was used to model percentage estimates. The method of moments<sup>9</sup> was applied to 37 dichotomous variables and adjusted for the finite population of sites.<sup>11</sup> Analysis of variance was used to determine what proportion of the among-site variance was due to within-city and among-city variances.

To determine to what degree the results based on a sample of meals could be generalized to the population of soup kitchen guests, estimates were recalculated for those variables related to the probability of a guest being selected into the sample, i.e., each response was multiplied by the

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reciprocal of the number of times each guest had eaten at soup kitchens in the last week. Responses for those who ate more than 10 meals were weighted by 1/10 so as not to underweight the responses of frequent users.

**Results**

For 34 of the 37 variables analyzed using the betabinomial distribution, more than half of the total variance was due to the among-site variance. The standard errors estimated from the percentages in the total sample ranged from 1.1 percent to 2.9 percent. Therefore, 3 percent can be considered as a general (conservative) estimate of the precision of the percentages reported in this paper. The variation within cities was found to be greater than the variation among cities. For 26 of the 37 variables examined, the among-city variance was zero. For the remaining 11 variables, the ratios of the among-city variance to the within-city variance ranged from .07 to .45, indicating that the among-city variance was at most less than one-half the size of the within-city variance.

When the estimates based on meals were compared to the new estimates based on people, only five variables had estimates that differed by 5 percent or more. The estimates based on meals were larger than those based on people for eating at another soup kitchen (21 percent vs 12 percent) and homelessness (17 percent vs 12 percent), and smaller for women (40 percent vs 45 percent), children in the household (17 percent vs 22 percent), and another adult in the household (12 percent vs 25 percent). Therefore, except for these few variables, the reported estimates for the population of soup kitchen meals can also be interpreted as estimates for the population of soup kitchen guests. Throughout the rest of the paper, the results based on the sample of meals are reported for meal recipients.

● *Who was dependent on soup kitchens?*

**Demographic Characteristics**

The majority of the meal recipients were men (60 percent). The average age of meal recipients was 43.6 years and 20 percent of them were 60 years old or older. Most of them were White (65 percent) although 29 percent were Black. Their educational attainment was generally low; 52 percent did not have a high school diploma. Most of the meal recipients lived alone or in a shelter or group home (70 percent).

**Employment**

Only 20 percent of the meal recipients were employed. Although 37 percent of the unemployed were looking for work, many of the unemployed were disabled (32 percent), retired (19 percent), raising a family (11 percent), or attending school or a training program (5 percent). Meal recipients who were employed earned on average \$5.47 per hour and held labor (45 percent) and service (30 percent) positions (Table 1).

**Income**

Ninety-three percent of the meal recipients' household incomes in the previous month were less than 100 percent of the poverty level and 55 percent were less than 50 percent of the poverty level (Table 2). The most frequently reported sources of household income were public assistance other than Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and work relief (28 percent), Supplementary Security Income

**TABLE 1—Types of Employment of Soup Kitchen Meal Recipients<sup>a</sup>**

Type of Employment	Examples	Percentage of Meals for Those Employed
Laborer	Day labor, collecting bottles and cans, odd jobs	45
Service	Household worker, wait person, janitor	30
Operative	Delivery person, cab driver, assembly worker	16
Clerical	Teacher's aide, clerk, secretary	7
Crafts person	Carpenter, mechanic	7
Professional/Manager	Substitute teacher	3

<sup>a</sup>These percentages do not add to 100 because more than one response was possible. Ninety-six sampled meal recipients responded to this question.

**TABLE 2—Household Income of Soup Kitchen Meal Recipients in Previous Month**

	Percentage of Meals
<i>Monthly Household Income (does not include food stamps)</i>	
\$0-150	27
\$151-300	22
\$301-600	41
\$601-\$1000	7
\$1001 +	4
Average (mean) per person household income	\$275
<i>Sources of Household Income</i>	
Other public assistance	28
Social Security	22
SSI	22
Wages	21
AFDC	9
Work Relief	9
Retirement	4
Veterans' disability	2
Workers' compensation	2
Unemployment	2
Child support	1

<sup>a</sup>These percentages do not add to 100 because households received income from more than one source.

(SSI) (22 percent), Social Security (22 percent), and wages (21 percent).

**Housing**

The problems that bring people to soup kitchens affect a broader segment of the population than just the homeless. Sixty-two percent of the meal recipients lived in apartments or houses. Only 17 percent were homeless—persons who had lived in a shelter (11 percent), or on the streets or in no one place (6 percent) during the previous month,\*\* and 20 percent lived in a room or group home. However, other indications of housing instability were that 15 percent of the meal recipients had moved since the month before, and 7 percent were living with unrelated people.

Thirty-one percent of the meal recipients who lived in apartments, houses, or rooms had housing that was partially subsidized or paid for by the government. It was not clear what portion of the rent of guests with subsidized housing was subsidized. However, for those without subsidized

\*\*This percentage would have been greater if soup kitchen sites that served meals only to residents of their shelters had been included in the sample.

housing, the average monthly household rent was \$193 and comprised 57 percent of the average household income.

● *What was the extent of and reasons for dependency on soup kitchens?*

Soup kitchen meal recipients tended to use soup kitchens often and over a long period of time. Fifty-one percent of the meal recipients had eaten five or more meals at soup kitchens during the previous week, and 59 percent had started eating at the soup kitchen more than a year ago.

The most common reasons that meal recipients gave for eating at the soup kitchen were the need for food (71 percent), including such reasons as no place to cook and nowhere else to eat, and economic problems (48 percent), such as no money (Table 3). Eighty-nine percent gave at least one of these reasons. However, 41 percent of the meal recipients also gave social reasons such as the need to be among people and the support of the soup kitchen staff.

● *What other food programs were used by soup kitchen meal recipients?*

**Public Programs**

Government food programs were used by almost two-thirds (64 percent) of the meal recipients' households, and many of these households received food from more than one program. Forty-eight percent of the soup kitchen meal recipients' households received food stamps in the previous month, 54 percent of the meal recipients whose households did not receive food stamps had received food stamps sometime in the past, 8 percent had applied for food stamps but did not receive them, and 38 percent had never applied for them.

Meal recipients' households that received food stamps received on the average \$80 in food stamps in the previous month, and 96 percent of them had household incomes that were below poverty level even when the value of their food stamps was included as income.

Forty-two percent of the meal recipients' households had received food from a free food, cheese, or other government surplus distribution in the previous month. Of those meal recipients' households who may have been eligible for the program, 29 percent received food from a senior center, 57 percent received food from a free or reduced price school breakfast, and 66 percent from a free or reduced price school

lunch program, and 37 percent received the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits.

**Private Programs**

Many meal recipients had received food from other private food sources in the previous month: food pantries (33 percent), shelters that served meals only to residents (9 percent), and credit from a grocery store (3 percent).

● *What were the meal recipients' perceived need for other services?*

**Housing**

Many of the meal recipients lived in housing that lacked basic facilities. Sixty-one percent of the meal recipients did not have access to a phone, 29 percent did not have access to a working refrigerator, and 28 percent did not have access to a working stove or range.

**Health Services**

The most frequently mentioned forms of health insurance were Medicaid (56 percent) and Medicare (21 percent). Twenty-three percent of the meal recipients had no health insurance, and 19 percent reported their families had medical expenses in the previous year that were not covered by insurance. More of the meal recipients reported a need for dental services that their family could not afford (18 percent) than a need for medical services (6 percent).

**Access to Food**

Fifteen percent of the meal recipients had difficulty getting to a grocery store; 11 percent had problems with transportation, and 7 percent had health or mobility problems that made it difficult for them to get to a store.

● *What differences were there in the dependency of subgroups of guests?*

Reports that have noted an increase in soup kitchen use have also noted an increase in the number of families with children eating meals at soup kitchens.<sup>1,3,4</sup> In the cities included in this study, 40 percent of the meal recipients were women and 17 percent of the meal recipients' households included children.

**Men vs Women**

The men and women eating meals at soup kitchens differed in that women were more likely to have health insurance (86 vs 75 percent), to have received AFDC (17 vs 1 percent), or SSI (31 vs 20 percent), and to have received food stamps (64 vs 39 percent), surplus foods (58 vs 38 percent), and food from a food pantry (44 vs 32 percent). Men had an average per person household income of \$328 compared to \$255 for women. Men were more likely to have received food from a shelter in the previous month (15 vs 6 percent), and ate more frequently at soup kitchens in the previous week (4.7 vs 3.2 meals).

**Guests Living with and without Children**

Soup kitchen meal recipients who lived with children were on average younger than meal recipients who did not live with children (35.7 vs 46.5 years), had lower average per person household incomes (\$146 vs \$330), were less likely to receive Social Security (12 vs 29 percent) and were more likely to receive AFDC (37 vs 1 percent), other public assistance (36 vs 25 percent) and food stamps (74 vs 43 percent), and were less likely to eat at shelters (2 vs 14

**TABLE 3—Meal Recipients' Reasons for Using Soup Kitchens<sup>a</sup>**

Reasons	Example	Percentage of Meals
Food	No food, no place to cook, don't know how to cook, special diet, nowhere else to eat/go	71
Economic reasons	No job, waiting for public assistance, no money	48
Social reasons	Love the people here, get out, lonely	41
Program	Shelter, religious services, referred to program, to get help, volunteer	12
Convenience	Close by, kill time, break monotony, other site closed, save time on cooking	11
Miscellaneous	Family difficulty, medical problems, for exercise, old	4

<sup>a</sup>These percentages do not add to 100 because meal recipients gave more than one reason.

percent). They had on average eaten fewer meals at the soup kitchen in the last week (2.8 vs 4.4) and had been eating at the soup kitchen for a shorter period of time (16.7 vs 23.0 months).

### Discussion

For future studies of soup kitchen meal recipients, the large among-site variance suggests that sampling from more sites could reduce the variance of estimates. For example, given a population with 100 sites, the standard error of an estimated percentage based on a sample of 40 meal recipients from five sites would be about 11 percent compared to only 6 percent for a sample of 10 meal recipients from 20 sites.

A variety of people other than single, homeless, males were found to eat at soup kitchens. Subgroups differed in their use of soup kitchens, their use of other programs, and their resources. Men and guests who do not have children in their households may be less likely than others to be, or perceive themselves to be, eligible for government benefits and other programs or more likely to prefer to eat at soup kitchens. Whether the goal is to reduce the number of people having to use soup kitchens or to serve the unmet needs of soup kitchen guests, differences in the utilization of programs among these subgroups should be kept in mind.

We also found that a large number of soup kitchen meal recipients ate often at soup kitchens and had been eating at them for a long period of time. To the degree that guests do not use soup kitchens as a source of "emergency food" but eat at them often and over a long period of time, more attention needs to be given to the nutritional quality of soup kitchen meals.<sup>12</sup>

Over one-half of the meal recipients had no access to a telephone and 18 percent stated their families needed dental services which they could not afford. The use of a telephone is an important resource for obtaining employment as well as interacting with social services to apply for and receive benefits. Neglected dental problems may interfere with soup kitchen guests' abilities to eat adequate diets.

Many soup kitchen meal recipients were participating in government food programs, such as food stamps, and still eating at soup kitchens. This suggests that government food programs may not provide all persons with sufficient resources to obtain enough food. Most of those receiving food stamps reported incomes below the poverty threshold even when their food stamp benefits were considered as income. Many of the meal recipients gave a social reason as one of their reasons for coming to the soup kitchens. Participation in a government food program, such as food stamps, may not substitute for the feeling of belonging and the social support that many soup kitchen guests receive at soup kitchens.

More research is needed on soup kitchen meal recipients to determine: why more than one-half of them were not using food stamps; how housing problems other than homeless-

ness, such as the cost of housing and the lack of basic facilities, e.g., a refrigerator, limit their access to food; and what other services are needed besides meals to improve their situations.

The findings from this study of soup kitchen guests indicate that any policies or programs to address the needs of soup kitchen guests must look past oversimplified views of soup kitchen guests, e.g., the homeless, singles, males, persons who have not accessed public programs, or persons who are eating at soup kitchens because of a temporary emergency. Soup kitchen guests include a variety of persons with a variety of patterns of and reasons for dependency on these programs.

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