Setting the Table Straight:
A Profile of Food Assistance Users
in Orange County, North Carolina

by

Ryan J. Winterberg-Lipp

A Master’s Project submitted to the faculty
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of City and Regional Planning
in the Department of City and Regional Planning.

Chapel Hill

2009

Approved by:

________________________________  _________________________
ADVISOR  READER (optional)
Setting the Table Straight:

A Profile of Food Assistance Users in Orange County, North Carolina

Ryan Winterberg-Lipp
Department of City and Regional Planning
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Masters Project
August 2009
Setting the Table Straight

INTRODUCTION

Founded around the New Hope Chapel, a small Anglican “chapel of ease,” the town of Chapel Hill has come to embody its nickname, the “Southern Part of Heaven” in many ways. Home to the University of North Carolina and renowned for its highly educated, progressive residents, Chapel Hill is “a community where a diversity of ideas, people, and opportunities converge.” Nestled within the town’s stone walls and historic oaks, however, sits a small historic building that serves a population who may not necessarily experience the “ease” and “opportunities” that life in Chapel Hill affords.

Located in the Town’s Old Municipal Building, the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service (IFC) is one of Orange County’s main non-public providers of food and financial assistance. Housing the Community Kitchen and the Men’s Residential Facility, the downtown center serves both the IFC’s homeless residents and people who live and work in Carrboro and Chapel Hill. With a Food Pantry and other supportive services located in the nearby Carrboro facility, the IFC plays an important role in the lives of many underserved individuals.

Since community discussions began in 2003, the IFC has been planning a reorganization of its services to better meet the needs of disadvantaged Orange County residents and employees. With the consolidation of the Community Kitchen and Food Pantry into a comprehensive FoodFirst model, the IFC plans to utilize its resources more efficiently and expand its options to better serve individuals and families.

As a component of the IFC Best Practices Committee’s research and investigation into promising service models and programs, interviews were conducted in the summer of 2008 to gather input and gauge community support for the proposed Comprehensive Service Center. Unexpectedly, this co-located facility was not met with skepticism regarding the potential for a mix of services, but with disbelief that the need for such a center existed in Chapel Hill and Carrboro. Some local leaders in both towns questioned the need for kitchen and pantry services; the very existence of hunger in Orange County was refuted. Attitudes equating social services to an enabling crutch emerged, reflecting negative per-
Setting the Table Straight

ceptions regarding the clients themselves. These interviews also revealed prevalent unfavorable attitudes among the local business community towards a potential service center and its perception as a blight upon the community. While all interviewees did not express such negative and misinformed views, these misconceptions threaten to undermine the IFC’s ability to both create a successful FoodFirst program and meet the growing needs of local service users.

From these community interviews, several immediate needs emerged for the Inter-Faith Council’s future food service consolidation. Initially, issue clarification and differentiation are necessary in order to inform local stakeholders and decision-makers that the IFC fills a necessary gap in the health of many Orange County households. Without common agreement on the concepts of hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty, the IFC’s future plans will remain obscured in misinformation. While sufficient research has not been conducted into the prevalence of such perceptual gaps and the true nature of poverty and food insecurity, anecdotal accounts indicate the need for further local investigation. Secondly, a clear and tangible portrait of the social service client—specifically the IFC client—must be established to both inform the community and provide the most appropriate future services.

With these immediate needs, the following exploration and data analysis will concentrate on closing the information gaps that exist regarding poverty, hunger, and food insecurity while dispelling prevalent misconceptions at the local level. While a severe lack of knowledge regarding social service client demographics and economic situations exists across the field, this investigation will lend insight into the nature of the hardships that Orange County residents face in order to gain a greater and more complete understanding of need and the most promising options to address disparities.

Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Employment Security Commission of North Carolina lend measurable insight into poverty and unemployment at the state and local levels, while America’s Second Harvest provides data on food needs. Coupled with a case study conducted at the Cedar Valley Food Pantry in Iowa to provide a comparable portrait of food assistance users, a survey conducted at the Inter-Faith Council’s Community Kitchen in Chapel Hill,
North Carolina will provide a first-cut analysis of kitchen user demographics, motivations, and needs, dispelling some of the commonly-held misconceptions that threaten to undermine the IFC’s ability to meet community needs as it plans for a social service reorganization.

BACKGROUND

Poverty. Food Insecurity. Hunger. Malnutrition. These words often conjure the vivid images of ragged clothing, dirty, sullen faces, emaciated figures, and bloated bellies. Yet as these concepts are encumbered with preconceptions and depicted with unfavorable images, the terms at their foundation beg for clarification and differentiation. The following concepts will serve as basis for an examination of the Inter-Faith Council’s clientele and the hardships they face, dispelling the common misunderstandings that exist regarding social service users.

MEASURES OF POVERTY

When Mollie Orshansky of the Social Service Administration developed the concept of measurable poverty thresholds in the 1963, she stated that, "to be poor is to be deprived of those goods and services and pleasures which others around us take for granted" (Ferguson, 1992, p. 4). Beyond this anecdotal concept, Orshansky’s proposed measures of a micro-household income threshold made perfect sense at the time she developed them. The U.S. had recently declared a War on Poverty under the Johnson admini-
Setting the Table Straight

stratification, and needed a concrete, statistical cross-section of the scope and distribution of the poor. This measure of household dollar income was easily comparable over time through standardized data sets available from the United States Census Bureau (Haveman, 2008, p. 1). Today poverty is still measured in quantitative terms by the U.S. Census Bureau as an income threshold that varies by family size and composition, nearly unchanged from its initial adoption in the mid-1960s.

Yet with objective statistics, how does the concept of poverty translate to the family level? According to the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center, “since its inception in the 1960s, the federal poverty level (FPL) has served as the nation’s primary measure of economic security. An absolute standard based on spending patterns from the Eisenhower era, the FPL is widely regarded as a flawed measure that fails to gauge the true extent of economic hardship” (Quinterno, 2008, p. 4). Traditional discussions of poverty in the U.S., however, have not seriously questioned this income-based, absolute poverty concept. Alternately, extensive efforts have been devoted to improve the measurement of financial means by extending the concept to include informal transfers and tax liabilities and to revise the poverty threshold through alternative scales and updated needs standards (Haveman, 2008, p. 2).

While economists tend to characterize the concept of hardship or well-being by a command over resources indicator, most often income, social scientists often argue for a multidimensional poverty concept that reflects the many aspects of well-being in addition to economic position (Haveman, 2008, pp. 3-4). Social isolation, unsafe or insufficient housing, health deficits, and food uncertainty are all concepts that beg for inclusion in such a holistic concept of poverty—but “Those who prefer this broader approach to the measurement face a difficult task,” as standardization and weighting is necessary to develop a comprehensive index of poverty (pp. 4-5). Efforts in the United Kingdom and European Union to develop a multidimensional index of deprivation based upon indicators of material hardship and a broad concept of “social exclusion” have focused on access to goods and services and opportunity (p. 15). Though these attempts to create a comprehensive definition of need have included aspects like housing, education, child welfare, and long term employment, they have yet to include measures of hunger
Setting the Table Straight

and food insecurity, critical features in assessing the true well-being of individuals and families.

MEASURES OF FOOD DEFICIENCIES

With defective measures of need prevalent in the U.S. and incomplete gauges used elsewhere, it is necessary to incorporate concepts of food availability and security in creating a holistic portrait of need. Providing clarification into the hardships that individuals face on a practical level, America’s Second Harvest offers a definition of hunger, a term that, though seemingly obvious, carries weighty misconceptions and images. Hunger is “The uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food, the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food. Hunger may produce malnutrition over time. . . . Hunger . . . is a potential, although not necessary, consequence of food insecurity. Unlike food insecurity, which is a household-level concept, hunger is an individual level concept” (America’s Second Harvest, 2008, p. 18). The definition provided by America’s Second Harvest contains three key concepts: hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Although these concepts are often interrelated, they do not necessarily occur simultaneously, a crucial distinction in the overall spectrum of need.

Hunger, the physical sensation caused by a lack of food, may be temporary or reoccurring. As the definition further explains, hunger is a possible, but not necessary, consequence of food insecurity, demonstrating their interrelated yet potentially disconnected nature. America’s Second Harvest describes the concept of food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: 1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and 2) an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways”—without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies (America’s Second Harvest, 2008, p. 18). Conversely, the notion of food insecurity, “the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain,” is referred to in the United States as the social and economic problem of lack of food due to resource of other constraints, not voluntary fasting, dieting, or illness. Although lack of economic resources is the most common such constraint, food insecurity can also be experienced when food is available and accessible but
cannot be used due to physical or other constraints, such as limited physical functioning by the elderly or those with disabilities (p. 18).

The concept of food insecurity was originally adapted from work by the Food Organization of the United Nations where participants in the 1977-1978 Nationwide Food Consumption Survey were asked which of the following statements best described the food eaten in their household: “enough and the kind wanted to eat, “enough but not always the kind wanted to eat, “sometimes not enough to eat,” or “often not enough to eat” (Drewnowski, & Spencer, 2004, p. 7). These founding questions distinguished food insecurity from overt hunger, a clarification that guides the examination of food availability today.

While this concept of food insecurity encompasses multiple individual and family-level situations, it can be further refined by the separation of low and very low security. Very low food security—food insecurity with hunger—occurs when one or more household members were hungry at least some time during the year because they could not afford enough food (America’s Second Harvest, 2008, p. 18).

Through these definitions, it is evident that food insecurity and hunger may occur simultaneously or separately, often in flux as individual and family stability changes.

The critical mention of malnutrition in the previously discussed definition of hunger lends insight into the common misconceptions that complicate understanding and awareness of hunger issues in the United States. Where “hunger may produce malnutrition over time,” the National Institutes of Health define malnutrition as “the condition that occurs when a person's body is not getting enough nutrients. The condition may result from an inadequate or unbalanced diet, digestive difficulties, absorption problems, or other medical conditions” (MedlinePlus, 2009). Malnutrition may be mild enough to show no physical symptoms of emaciation or deficiency, but the concept often elicits the images of starvation, frailty, and destitution that occur with famine and widespread poverty. Malnutrition in the medical sense can, however, result from the hunger that is characteristic of very low food security, where limited and uncertain food supply leads to inadequate nutrition that is severe enough to cause physical harm. This state of insufficient nutritional intake is generally manifested in a less severe form in the United
States than in developing nations due in large part to a network or established federal nutrition programs that provide some safety net for low-income families. While starvation seldom occurs in the U.S., children and adults do experience chronic and mild undernutrition when financial resources are low (The Food Research and Action Council, 2008).

CONCEPT TRANSLATION: WORKING POVERTY

While these definitions may be clear following a detailed discussion, the confusion and misconceptions that arise from their inappropriate application obscure the underlying concerns that face many families. In order to offer insight into how these issues translate to the individual and family level, an exploration into the concept of working poverty will lend substance to the terms.

“Imagine working full-time, but nonetheless living in poverty. Hard as this may be for many of us to imagine, almost a quarter of the nation’s workforce in 2001 earned .... [a] wage [that] placed a family of four very close to the official poverty line. Most workers with earnings in this range are among the 42 percent of American workers who have never attended college” (Ferguson, 2005, p. 71). What this scenario introduces is the distressing trend of falling relative hourly earnings and increasing income inequality that has characterized the American workforce in past decades. “Prospects for these workers [without college degrees] have been markedly inferior to those for college graduates and are worsening. For men and women alike, high school graduates’ hourly earnings in 1973 were roughly 70 percent those of college graduates. But by 2001, the figure dropped to 50 percent and 60 percent respectively” (p. 72).

“Working Hard is Still Not Enough,” a report published by the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, indicates the very crux of increasing working poverty in the United States. As wages have declined in value, “In 1969 a parent could work full-time at minimum wage and earn enough to support his or her spouse and two children at poverty level.... Today, full-time employment at minimum wage doesn’t even raise a family of two above the federal poverty line, much less approach real living costs” (Schmidt, 2003, p. 13). Trends for the lowest wage earners have been even more startling as the bottom 10 percent never saw their average hourly wage rise above 1979
levels from 1979 to 2000 (Schmidt, 2003, p. 13). More recently, income inequality among working families increased by almost 10 percent from 2002 to 2006, with the number of low-income working families increasing by 350,000 during the same period, concerningly a time of steady national economic growth (p. 13). This growing disparity between poor and wealthy families increasingly affects more children, with more than 21 million children living in a low-income working family (p. 13).

These low-income working families typically include men and women who work as cashiers, custodians, child care workers, health care aides, and security guards—workers who constitute the backbone of an increasingly service-based economy (Schmidt, 2003, p. 2). Contrary to popular misconception, 72 percent of low-income families are employed, with adults in low-income working families working on average 2,522 hours per year in 2006, the equivalent of almost one and a quarter full-time workers. “They work hard, pay taxes and strive to achieve a brighter economic future for their families. But the lack the earnings necessary to meet their basic needs—a struggle exacerbated by soaring prices for food, gas, health care and education” (p. 2).

As the economic turmoil that began in 2007 has grown, working families in poverty are presented with increasingly greater challenges. With unemployment claims at rates not seen in decades, coupled with increasing consumer prices and other cost of living expenditures, food insecurity and hunger rates will undoubtedly increase as families are feeling the budget squeeze on multiple levels. Though data has not been released since recent increases in economic hardship and rising consumer costs, the Food Research and Action Council has reported that the Thrifty Food Plan, the mix of food items low-income families typically rely on, rose 10.5 percent from August 2007 to August 2008 (The Food Research and Action Council, 2008, p. 1). The cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, the USDA’s estimate of the expense of a minimally adequate diet, also rose almost $40 from May 2007 to May 2008 for a family of four, the equivalent of nearly an extra day’s work each month at the minimum wage rate (p. 1). According to the American Farm Bureau Federation Marketbasket Survey, common food prices increased in the first quarter of 2008—flour by 69 percent, eggs by 34 percent, and cheese by 15 percent, representing a dramatic increase in the food expenditures of average families (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2008).
Setting the Table Straight

With the declining value of wages, increasing consumer costs and household expenditures, how do the working poor make end meet while “living very close to the economic edge?” (Wright, 2009, p. 40). Given that the federal poverty standards assume that a poor family will spend one third of its gross income on food, food assistance—both private and public—plays an important role when needs outweigh increasingly scarce resources (p. 40).

THE RISE OF PRIVATE FOOD ASSISTANCE

In the past 20 years, delivery of food assistance to the poor has changed dramatically. Although the availability of cash assistance has narrowed, the availability of food assistance has widened with the emergence and growth of food pantries and soup kitchens as a source of free food. According to America’s Second Harvest, in 2005, approximately 24 to 27 million Americans received food from a food pantry at least once in the year, while only 36 percent of households dependent on a food pantry received Food Stamps, and one third of pantry households had never even applied for Food Stamps (Daponte, & Bade, 2006, p. 668). Figures like these suggest a fundamental shift in the perception of the food safety net.

Three factors that have generally been sited to explain the formation of the private food assistance network stem from federal actions in the 1970s and 80s. First, the elimination of the Food Stamp purchase requirement—that a household pay out of its own pocket to obtain food stamps—in 1979 created a permanent demand for private food assistance (Daponte, & Bade, 2006, p. 668). With an increase of an
estimated 3.6 million program participants, coupled with the then lack of economic incentive to allocate the former “buy-in” dollars for food, demand for free food increased dramatically with the marginal cost of additional household food (Daponte, & Bade, 2006, p. 675). Second, the Reagan administration’s antagonism toward the antihunger community through its denial of the existence of hunger in America and resulting legislation which cut the Food Stamp program in the early 1980s encouraged the antihunger community to mobilize and provide private assistance, rather than to exert pressure to increase public food assistance. Third, the availability of food to distribute, stemming from the reemergence of the government commodities program in the early 1980s and the formation of America’s Second Harvest, helped to move the network from an ad hoc system to a permanent response to hunger (p. 668). The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1982 included legislation that recommended that “the government distribute federally-owned surplus commodities to soup kitchens and other groups that provided free food to indigent people,” often considered the origin of the private food assistance network (p. 676).

Although some food pantries like the Inter-Faith Council existed prior to 1983 and the establishment of TEFAP, until then, their food supply generally came from donations from individuals and businesses. Distributing TEFAP goods through the private food assistance network resulted in a dramatic increase in responsibility for the food pantries, provided pantries with a regular supply of nutritious and substantial food, and increased the quality of food available (Daponte, & Bade, 2006, p. 677). It also encouraged existing charities to add food distribution to the list of services they already provided to the needy. Word of the available food spread, and although pantries were not allowed to advertise their food distribution, tremendous demand created long lines at pantries with some even resorting to using volunteers for crowd control (p. 677). In 1990, Congress made TEFAP permanent and changed the program’s name from the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program to The Emergency Food Assistance Program (p. 680). With public food assistance’s near reversal since the 1960s, private food assistance has become a parallel food support system in the overall landscape of social service supply.

In terms of the increased demand for food from the private food assistance network at the macro level, researchers have
pointed to three direct roots. First, the extremely poor—those eligible for the maximum of Food Stamp benefits—demanded free food based upon the austerity of the Thrifty Food Plan, the basis for Food Stamp benefits, because of its inability to reliably supply on a long-term basis. Secondly, the structural unemployment that stemmed from the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy in the early 1980s created a group of newly poor with an acute need for food assistance. Finally, the increased demand for food in the 1980s was an unintended consequence of the elimination of the Food Stamp buy-in requirement; the removal of the purchase requirement led to a dramatic increase in Food Stamp program participation but may have also unintentionally created a chronic demand for free food (Daponte & Bade, 2006, pp. 683-684).

The concurrent steady erosion of the appropriateness of the federal poverty line narrowed the Food Stamp program’s target population. As discussed previously, since the federal poverty line was established in 1965, food spending has accounted for a smaller proportion of expenditures for low-income households, while other necessary expenses such as shelter, utilities, and taxes constitute a greater proportion of household costs. Multiple scholars contend that an updating of the federal poverty line’s assumptions to account for food expenditures at one seventh of an average family’s income and housing expenses at one half, then considerably more families would fall below the poverty line and would therefore be eligible for Food Stamp assistance (Daponte & Bade, 2006, p. 684). That is, the current measure of poverty does not take into account many people who, under similar circumstances, would have fallen below the poverty level when the Food Stamp program first became part of the social safety net. Many people who therefore do not qualify for Food Stamps rely on the private food assistance that food pantries and soup kitchens provide as a substitute for public assistance.

In 2001, America’s Second Harvest found that 64 percent of food pantry households did not receive Food Stamps, and 37 percent of those who did not believed that they were ineligible for the program. Although in 2001, four percent of food pantry households reported that they did not receive Food Stamps because they did not need them, that rate increased to 20 percent in 2005 (Daponte & Bade, 2006, p. 684). Statistics like these reflect that an increasing propor-
tion of food pantry clients perceive private food assistance as the first line in the food safety net. While food pantries are often capturing proportionately more food insecure families, they may be doing so at an increasing rate. A comparison of Current Population Survey results from 2001 to 2002 revealed that enrollment in the Food Stamp program did not tend to alleviate a situation of food insecurity but rather, for households that entered the program during that year, “food security status more commonly deteriorated (20.9 percent) and less commonly improved (14.4 percent)” during that period (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, pp. 405-406). Statistics like these indicate that while the public safety net may not be the first route for food insecure families, it may also fail to prevent many families from slipping farther.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

According to America’s Second Harvest, 25 million Americans turned to charities for food assistance in 2004. Given the federally supported—although deficient—social safety net in the United States, why is there such a growing need for private food assistance at the micro level? Who uses food pantries and why? Researchers Maureen Berner, Trina Ozer, and Sharon Paynter addressed these questions in a comprehensive two-year study at the largest food pantry in northeastern Iowa, the Cedar Valley Food Pantry (CVFP). The CVFP provides fruits, vegetables, pastas, cereals, and many other foods in boxes. To be eligible to receive food boxes, CVFP clients must have an income at or below 185 percent of federal income guidelines and provide verification of all household income, photo IDs, and social security cards for all household members (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, p. 406). The pantry distributes three types of food boxes: elderly food boxes, crisis or “emergency” food boxes, and supplemental food boxes. Elderly food boxes represented a small portion of the CVFP’s distributions, so the majority of the research centered around clients receiving emergency or supplemental boxes. The majority of emer-
Emergency clients were those who recently experienced a crisis such as losing a job, the death of a family member, or loss of a home due to fire. Emergency clients were able to receive a box of food every week until they began receiving Food Stamps, an enrollment required by the CVFP. After three months, if the individual was still in need of food assistance, he or she became a “supplemental client.” The CVFP’s supplemental clients required support on a more regular basis, usually to repeatedly augment other sources of income or public assistance (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, p. 407).

Berner et al. presented three specific research questions in order to develop a tangible portrait of the nonprofit food pantry client (2008, pp. 403-404):

- How long pantry clients needed assistance, their employment status, and whether they received government benefits
- Why clients sought assistance
- What factors influenced whether a person was a short-term or long-term food pantry client

The severe lack of knowledge regarding social service client demographics and economic situations can be attributed to the difficulty of collecting valid and reliable data. While many food providers maintain data on the number of clients served, their methods for tracking clients differ widely. Food pantries or soup kitchens may track the number of individuals coming through the door, the number of families served, or the number of meals served per year. Each provider may or may not ask for client names and keep records of how frequently an individual returns for assistance. Due to this lack of detail and consistency, due in large part to the limited research capacity of these small nonprofits, Berner et al. discovered there was very little data to study (2008, p. 408).

From July 2004 to April 2006, the CVFP asked all clients requesting assistance from the pantry to complete a voluntary, two-page survey each time they accessed services. The survey included closed-ended questions on employment, housing, occurrence and type of crisis events, special dietary needs, and receipt of government-paid benefits including food stamps, welfare, and Social Security (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, p. 408). The CVFP made the decision not to collect information on gender, race, age, ethnicity, family size, or income because the organization felt those types of questions had the potential to present a barrier for its cli-
As such, no demographic information was included in the analysis. A total of 2,031 usable surveys allowed for a detailed examination of the characteristics of food pantry clients in Iowa and increased the “generalizability” of these findings to other populations (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, p. 409).

While detailed methodology and results were presented in “A Portrait of Hunger, the Social Safety Net, and the Working Poor,” selected results lend insight into the characteristics of food pantry clients (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, pp. 410-417) (Figure 1).

Based upon the Cedar Valley Food Pantry’s survey results, Berner et al. concluded that “employment is not an insurance policy against hunger,” where “rather than easing financial burdens, having a job appears to increase the weight of an individual’s responsibilities” (2008, pp. 411, 413). Furthermore, many clients relied on help from both government and nonprofits to make ends meet. Those who were working and receiving benefits were almost as likely to need long-term assistance as those who only received benefits or those who did not receive benefits and were not working, demonstrating that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More than 25 percent of individuals who visited the CVFP reported having a job at the time of the survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of survey clients with jobs, 74 percent were emergency clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of long-term clients, 26 percent reported having a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental clients were 20 percent more likely to be employed than emergency clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Though many clients reported working in the low wage service and food industry, the range of employers included hospitals, farms, and local governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than half of surveyed individuals did not receive government benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term pantry users were almost two times more likely to be social security recipients than emergency clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving Food Stamps more than doubled an individual’s odds of needing long-term nonprofit food assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 percent of interviewees were renters, 16 percent homeowners, 14 percent lived with a friend or relative, 4 percent were homeless, and 5 percent had another living arrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 percent of emergency clients had recently lost a job with loss of financial support from a spouse, health problems, a change in domestic relationship or housing status, and a recent move to the area following in prevalence of motivation for using the CVFP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the need for food support was not a temporary phenomenon, but an ingrained and persistent hardship (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008, pp. 416).

With the foundation presented by Berner, Ozer, and Paynter, a similar discussion of the Inter-Faith Council’s client characteristics can be conducted in order to lend insight into the portrait of the local social service user and increasing demand for food assistance. While the Cedar Valley study examined the characteristics of food pantry users as opposed to soup kitchen clients, the Berner et al. findings will have increased significance with the Inter-Faith Council’s future service reorganization.

THE SOCIAL SERVICE LANDSCAPE IN ORANGE COUNTY

As one of Orange County’s main providers of food assistance and other supportive services aside from the Orange County Department of Social Services, the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service plays an important role in the health and prosperity of local residents and employees. Founded in 1963 by seven members of local religious institutions—the Committee of Church Women United—to unify their volunteer efforts to address the conditions of poverty in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, the Inter-Faith Council (IFC) provides various services and assistance programs to meet the needs of Orange County’s underserved populations in both its Chapel Hill and Carrboro locations (Inter-Faith Council).

Currently the range of IFC services include two residential facilities: the Community House, a dormitory-style facility that provides spaces for 50 men in downtown Chapel Hill, and HomeStart, a facility that offers a safe haven for women and children in northern Chapel Hill. Community House is also home to the Robert Nixon Free Clinic and the Commu-
nity Kitchen, the IFC’s free, public food kitchen. The Community Kitchen serves three meals a day to visitors and Community House residents through the generosity of institutional, religious, commercial, and individual donations and volunteers. The majority of the IFC’s Community Services are housed at the Carrboro location including a Food Pantry that provides food assistance from donations and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a federal commodities program. Other assistance programs include financial assistance for rent and utilities, and non-financial requests like clothing vouchers and identification assistance. IFC administration is also located at the Carrboro office along with other local non-profits including El Centro Latino, El Futuro, People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, and JOCCA Building Futures Youth Program (Inter-Faith Council).

“In the fall of 2003, the Inter-Faith Council President and the Mayor of Chapel Hill entered a dialogue centered around the need for a stronger sense of ownership by the community-at-large of the issue of homelessness” (N. Ammarel, & K. C. Foy, personal communication, March 10, 2005). From this dialogue emerged an agreement to convene a “community planning process” involving stakeholders at various levels and different fields. In early 2004, individuals representing various constituencies in Orange County and the towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro came together to discuss the larger issue of homelessness and poverty in the area and guide the IFC’s future directions as the primary Southern Orange service provider.

The members of this Community Planning Group examined the IFC’s services, programs, facilities, finances, and community connections while concurrently planning and negotiating the relocation of Community House and Community Kitchen while the Town of Chapel Hill renovated their long-time home, the Old Municipal Building in the downtown. After six months of investigation, research, and introspection, the Community Planning Group and the IFC Board of Directors met to discuss the principles and recommendations that had emerged. With consensus regarding the agency’s vision for the future, the Group announced seven guiding principles to guide the IFC’s services and outreach. The first two principles, “Creation of a Comprehensive Service Center to consolidate food services and offer a greater depth of services to the homeless and those at risk of homelessness” and “Development of a
Setting the Table Straight

new Men’s Residential Facility offering a continuum of housing services, based on a rehabilitative program model,” shifted the IFC’s long term focus (N. Ammarell, & K. C. Foy, personal communication, March 10, 2005).

Based upon these principles, the Inter-Faith Council began to plan for the reorganization of its services, both spatially and functionally. With the recommendation to develop a new Men’s Residential Facility, the IFC plans to provide a continuum of services to better support its clients in a site-built facility that can better meet the program’s needs in the long term. With the eventual separation of Community House and the Community Kitchen, the Community Planning Group advised for the creating of a Comprehensive Service Center—now named FoodFirst—to provide consolidated kitchen and pantry facilities and complimentary supportive services. While the exact mix of services and organizational design is still under construction, the innovative model will use available resources—space, volunteer time, donations, and perishable items—in the most effective way possible to maximize community benefit (N. Ammarell, & K. C. Foy, personal communication, March 10, 2005).

With the separation of the IFC’s homeless male residents from the Community Kitchen, the FoodFirst center is expected to serve a different demographic: hungry individuals and families who are primarily housed and employed. This population will include those who already seek Food Pantry grocery assistance—individuals and families who have cooking facilities available to them—while also offering a wider range of nutritional services through hot meals. The co-location of these two services is expected to not only shift the perspective of the IFC’s food assistance with the removal of the IFC’s homeless clients and the stigma they carry, but increase usage, as well.

**INCREASED INTER-FAITH COUNCIL DEMAND**

With recent headlines like “Food Pantries See a Surge in Demand,” and “At Soup Kitchens, Demand Rises, But Supplies and Funds Are Low” from the New York Times, the increase in need for food assistance is clear. Quantifying such headlines, America’s Second Harvest conducted a local impact survey from April to May 2008 to gauge the increased demand on food service providers. 99 percent of food bank respondents stated that they had experienced an
Setting the Table Straight

increase in the number of clients served within the past year. Contributing factors included the rising cost of fuel (93 percent), the rising cost of food (92 percent), mortgage or rent issues (46 percent), rising unemployment (43 percent), rising underemployment (42 percent), and the inadequacy of food stamps (31 percent) (Feeding America, 2008). America’s Second Harvest estimated the increase in food pantry clients at 15 to 20 percent while over 81 percent of surveyed food banks indicated that they were unable to meet the demand without having to reduce the amount of food they distributed or their operations (2008).

Such economic trends have affected the Inter-Faith Council, as well, in a local economy where families are facing increased hardships. As the

(Figure 2)
IFC’s spring 2009 newsletter states, “As the cost of living continues to rise, so does the demand for IFC’s services,” demonstrating that recent economic shifts have begun to create more potential clients and increase need among existing clients. The IFC Scorecard quantifies the growing need for IFC assistance from FY 2007 to 2008, illustrating both increases in meals served at the Community Kitchen (11 percent), grocery bags distributed at the Food Pantry (17 percent), and a drastic increase of Pantry household members at over 75 percent (Figure 2).

Using data from Inter-Faith Council Program Reports, Figures 3-5 illustrate the increase in IFC services from the 4th quarter 2007 to the 4th quarter 2008. In terms of the bags of groceries distributed at the food pantry, food distribution steadily increased throughout 2008 (Figure 3). From 2007Q4 to 2008Q4, food distribution increased almost 17 percent, indicating a greater demand consistent with the 15-20 percent increase in clients presented by America’s Second Harvest. Drastically different from the America’s Second Harvest survey, however, is the IFC data illustrating a substantial increase in new client enrollment at the food pantry. While new client applications were steady from 2007Q4 through 2008Q3, enrollment increased over 57 percent in
the last quarter of 2008 alone (Figure 4). In terms of meals served at the IFC’s Community Kitchen, 2008 increases were not as notable as in previous figures, but the number of meals served still increased by over 17 percent from 4th quarter 2007 to 4th quarter 2008 (Figure 5).

Coupled with statistics from the IFC Scorecard, Program Report data illustrates a social service landscape in Orange County that is experiencing increased demand and membership. The dramatic increase in Food Pantry membership and bags of groceries provided indicates that the primarily housed and employed Pantry members are facing greater hardships and seeking food assistance at higher rates. These working poor are encountering rising consumer costs and the falling value of wages in an uncertain economy where private food assistance may be the factor that keeps many individuals and families from falling over the edge. Understanding the client characteristics of this increased membership and assistance usage is critical in both anticipating demand trends and determining the forces that drive Orange County residents and employees to seek assistance.

QUANTIFYING NEED

A brief comparison of poverty and food insecurity figures in North Carolina and Orange County quantifies the needs and increasing hardships local residents are facing. With already significant poverty and food insecurity rates, recent increasing unemployment figures lend insight into both the IFC’s greater service demand and the potential changing profile of the future social service user.

NORTH CAROLINA
POVERTY

The American Community Survey reports that in 2006, 14.3 percent of North Carolinians lived below the poverty line with 19.5 percent of children under 18 falling under the threshold (U.S. Census Bureau). Using these figures, North Carolina ranks 13th in the nation in terms of an overall poverty rate. In the state, 72 percent of the families with children that fall below twice the federal poverty level are employed, with the typical family holding the equivalent of 1.2 full-time jobs (Quinterno, 2008, pp. 12-13). The Working Poor Families Project lends insight into this employment-poverty mismatch in a 2006 study that examines the percent
of jobs in occupations that paid below the federal poverty level. According to the report, “Characteristics, Conditions and Challenges of Low-Income Working Families in the States,” 24.4 percent of North Carolina’s jobs were in such occupations that paid below the FPL, a generally insufficient gauge of family wealth and capacity (The Working Poor Families Project, 2006).

Given the general acknowledgement of the inability of the federal poverty level to lend insight into the true well-being of North Carolina families, the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center developed the Living Income Standard (LIS), a market-based approach for estimating the income a working family with children would need to pay for basic expenses. Though still a conservative estimate, the LIS approximates the lowest income a family would need to be economically “self-sufficient” on a frugal budget (Quinterno, 2008, p. 2-3). The 2008 LIS finds that the typical North Carolina family with children must earn $41,484 annually—an amount equal to 201 percent of the federal poverty level—to afford the actual costs of the seven essential expenses that comprise the federal threshold. In order to meet this level, the adult in the average family would need to earn a combined $19.80 per hour for every working hour of every week of the year. Yet 37 percent of the state’s families included in the Budget and Tax Center report fell below that modest income threshold (p. 3). For a single parent, the LIS is 3.2 times greater than the state’s minimum wage of $6.15 per hour (p. 5). With the LIS’s more accurate indicator of family well-being, the portrait of need in North Carolina is far greater than the federal government’s figures suggest, perhaps revealing underestimated trends in food insecurity, as well.

**FOOD INSECURITY**

Using statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, North Carolina has an official rate of food insecurity—both low and very low—of 12.6 percent, with a very low food security rate of 4.0 percent for 2005 through 2007. This total food insecurity rate gives the state a 13th position rank in terms of highest percentages, and a relatively lower rank of 24 for very low security (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2007). North Carolina’s food insecurity percentage of 12.6 percent exceeds the 2006 national average of 10.9 percent despite the lack of recent data reflecting current economic trends.
ORANGE COUNTY

POVERTY

Finally, given comparative data at the state level, a contrast with Orange County can be conducted to lend insight into local poverty trends. The 2006 American Community Survey reports that the percentage of the population in Orange County living under 100 percent of the federal poverty level stood at 13.9 percent, while the percentage living under 200 percent was 31.7 percent, a rate more in alignment with the Living Income Standard discussed previously (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). While the county’s 2006 median household income was $46,114, higher than the $41,484 figure cited earlier by the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center as the state’s LIS, Orange County is actually ranked as the state’s second most expensive county, requiring an annual Living Income Standard of $49,256 to support the average family (Quinterno, 2008, p. 9). This annual LIS is over 240 percent of the federal poverty level and 385 percent of the hourly minimum wage, indicating an inflated cost of living where over 50 percent of the county’s household’s incomes do not exceed the specific LIS (p. 9).

With Orange County’s relatively high cost of living as compared to the state of North Carolina, recent unemployment figures are especially concerning. According to the Employment Security Commission of North Carolina, unemployment in the Triangle—Wake, Durham, Orange, Chatham, Franklin, Harnett, Johnston, and Person counties—reached 9.6 percent in June 2009, an increase of 5.3 percent from February 2008. Though unemployment rates vary drastically among Triangle counties—Person County with the highest at 12.1 percent and Orange County with the lowest in the state at 6.7 percent—the connectedness and proximity of Triangle counties demonstrates that despite relative insulation from extreme economic hardships, Triangle residents rapidly face difficulties on various financial scales (Unemployment rises in N.C. metro areas, most counties, 2009). With increasing job losses and the potential for higher underemployment from decreased working hours, Orange County individuals and households may seek assistance, both public and private, to fill the widening gaps in security.
Setting the Table Straight

FOOD INSECURITY
As county-specific food insecurity data is not readily available, the following survey of Inter-Faith Council Community Kitchen clients will begin to create a profile of food needs in Orange County to lend insight into local trends and requirements of food assistance providers. As the social services landscape in the county faces growing demand in a declining economic climate, a clear portrait of hunger and food insecurity are crucial in the future provision of such critical services.

COMMUNITY KITCHEN SURVEY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY
As discussed by Berner, Ozer, and Paynter, the general difficulties in collecting valid and reliable data regarding social service users often obscures client demographics and motivations (2008, p. 408). With inconsistent tracking and varying privacy standards, client surveys can often lend insight into the micro characteristics of food assistance users. While the Inter-Faith Council has proactively designed a comprehensive client database using Food Pantry intake surveys, an information gap regarding Community Kitchen clients still exists. As the Kitchen is open to the public and does not require membership or registration, very little is known about the characteristics and motivations of Kitchen users. In order to better inform community stakeholders and local decision-makers regarding the IFC’s future plans for food service consolidation, the Best Practices Committee recommended a survey of Community Kitchen users. The results of such a survey are also critical internally as the design and mix of programs and operations for the proposed FoodFirst program will be planned with the current and future client in mind.
Setting the Table Straight

The IFC’s Community Kitchen Survey was based upon requests and unanswered questions encountered during community interviews in the summer of 2008. Local leaders in Chapel Hill and Carrboro expressed uncertainty regarding Kitchen client employment status, residence, and tenure of need (J. Brandes, & R. Winterberg-Lipp, personal communication, July 2008). Based upon interviewee questions and concerns, a survey was designed to begin to address these information gaps. From an extensive list of potential questions based upon these requests, IFC staff excluded questions regarding race, ethnicity, age, immigration status, income, and location and tenure of residence to avoid both an invasion of user privacy and potential unwillingness to complete the survey. With input from Food Pantry and Community Kitchen staff, a final thirteen-question survey was developed to capture general information, user motivation, and service preferences (Appendix A). Organizationally, the survey was formatted to fit on one side of paper with background information and the survey justification on the opposite side to aid the survey administrator.

In order to maintain objectivity and gather survey data in a timely manner, the IFC enlisted the help of graduate student interns from the University of North Carolina School of Social Work to conduct the survey. These MSW interns were involved with the IFC throughout the spring 2009 semester, so they were familiar with the IFC’s mission and services and underwent survey training conducted by IFC staff. 102 survey responses were gathered from Tuesday, March 17th through Thursday, March 26th during all three mealtimes. Surveys were not conducted on Saturday, March 21st, but weekend usage was captured on Sunday, March 22nd. Two surveys were excluded from the following analysis due to incomplete data, resulting in a sample size of 100 complete surveys. Survey data was then analyzed using Microsoft Excel and controlled by residence type to produce a portrait of the current Inter-Faith Council Community Kitchen user and potential future FoodFirst client.

LIMITATIONS

As discussed previously in the Cedar Valley Food Pantry case study, the reasons individuals and households seek food assistance are varied and ever-changing. While these motivations undoubtedly vary by person and family—loss of income, unexpected hardship, chronic need—they also fluctu-
ate by the season, time of the month, and day of the week. For example, those individuals employed in education or for a school system could encounter greater needs in the summer months without prorated income. As paychecks dwindle towards the end of the month, families may need to seek food assistance to fill the gaps in a shrinking budget. Restaurant and food service employees may have access to meals while on the clock, but not on days spent away from the workplace. For these reasons and many more, the survey conducted at the Community Kitchen may only be truly characteristic of those individuals who visited the Kitchen and opted to participate in the survey during the specific ten days in March.

With the sample size of 100 responses, robust generalizations regarding social service users may not be possible. It is important to note, however, that the March 2009 Community Kitchen survey was intended to serve as the first in a series of surveys to be conducted at various times of the year to capture potential patterns in usage. With additional future surveys, the IFC will be able to create a complete portrait of the social service client and potential needs.

SURVEY RESULTS

HOUSING STATUS

A first-cut analysis of the 100 Community Kitchen survey results by housing status revealed that 39 percent of respondents were considered “traditionally housed”—they either rented an apartment or owned a home—while 61 percent of those surveyed either lived in a shelter, camp, rooming or boarding house, recovery center, stayed with friends or relatives, or lived on the streets (Figure 6). Of those traditionally housed survey respondents, 79 (31 individuals) percent rented an apartment while 21 percent (8 individuals) owned a home.

Within the 61 “non-traditionally housed” responses, 38 sur-
Setting the Table Straight

veys were most likely completed by Community House residents—the respondent was male and indicated both a Chapel Hill residence and shelter/camp answer. With the currently co-located Community Kitchen and Community House, all 50 male residents have the option of dining at the Kitchen for free—the location of the survey. Though potentially some of these 38 respondents could have resided in a camp or other temporary structure at the time of the survey, they were most likely residents of Community House.

While the lack of differentiation within the survey to indicate a Community House resident versus a resident of another temporary or unintended structure does present a limitation, the IFC’s intent was to indicate general characteristics of food pantry clients. One of the most often cited perceptions regarding IFC clients—both Kitchen and Pantry—encountered during community interviews was housing status, i.e. homelessness (J. Brandes, & R. Winterberg-Lipp, personal communication, July 2008). Though the “traditionally housed” versus “non-traditionally housed” categories are not perfect indicators of client residence, they provide a broad-based perspective of the typical user’s residence status. Given that almost 40 percent of respondents rent or own a house on the open market, this first cut analysis clearly illustrates that despite prevalent perceptions, Community Kitchen users are often housed.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND SECTOR

Controlling the 100 Community Kitchen survey responses by employment status resulted in a proportion of 35 percent employed and 65 percent unemployed clients (Figure 7). This 35 percent employment rate—35 total survey responses—includes both full-time and part-time employment. 18 of these 35 responses indicated part-time employment while the remaining 17 revealed full-time employment, a roughly 50/50 split. From the various interviews conducted in the summer of 2008, community
Setting the Table Straight

members revealed the perception that all IFC Kitchen clients were unemployed, a misconception that is easily dispelled with a simple analysis (J. Brandes, & R. Winterberg-Lipp, personal communication, July 2008). While IFC staff indicated that the level of employment was lower than anticipated, recent job losses in the economic downturn lends insight into this unexpectedly higher rate of client unemployment.

Regarding employment sector, Berner, Ozer, and Paynter indicated in their survey of food pantry clients at the Cedar Valley Food Pantry that though many clients reported working in the low wage service and food industry, the range of employers included hospitals, farms, and local governments (2008, p. 413). In terms of responses from the IFC’s Community Kitchen survey, client employment sectors varied widely, as well (Figure 8). While nine of the 35 survey respondents indicated employment in food services, 11 of those surveyed reported employment in the trades—construction, carpentry, plumbing, etc.—while five indicated employment in health care. Notably, with the Community Kitchen’s proximity to the University of North Carolina hospitals, these five health care workers would most likely be employed by the UNC health system, positions that are often considered skilled and moderately-paying. The “other” category captured six responses with specific sectors including traffic control at public events, laundry, sound system set-up, gymnasium, and odd jobs. Figure 8 illustrates that while there is a concentration of Kitchen client employment in the service industry, careers in the trades dominate the distribution—typically well-paying careers that have been hard hit in the economic recession that began in 2008.
THE POTENTIAL FOODFIRST CLIENT

With future plans to consolidate the Community Kitchen and Food Pantry following the construction of a new self-contained Men’s Residential Facility where residents will have their food needs met on-site, the IFC expects a complete shift in Community Kitchen user demographics. With the future Men’s Shelter to be located in northern Chapel Hill, the IFC is investigating the most appropriate location for the proposed FoodFirst center. As the most promising site is the current IFC Pantry and administration building at 103 West Main Street in Carrboro, the dynamic of food assistance users is expected to shift further. With a potentially less downtown location, farther away from downtown businesses and high traffic areas, the IFC will focus on serving local households and the working poor. Though the FoodFirst center will not exclusively serve housed and employed Orange County residents and employees, the continuum of services that will be provided for homeless individuals at the Men’s Residential facility will allow the FoodFirst center to focus on those in danger of homelessness and in need of long-term food assistance.

In terms of the survey response data that would be representative of this potential FoodFirst client, an adaptive approach is necessary to capture appropriate characteristics. In order to create the FoodFirst profile, the 38 responses indicating residence at Community House—male with a Chapel Hill residence at a shelter or camp—were eliminated to exclude the population that will no longer seek Community Kitchen services when the Men’s Residential Facility becomes self-contained. The FoodFirst client therefore encompassed respondents who live in apartments, homes, non-Chapel Hill shelter or camps, rooming or boarding houses, or “other”—most often living with friends or family, in vehicles, living outside, or at other local recovery centers. These clients would be served by the FoodFirst mission of meeting the needs of local households and hungry persons. This aggregation of potential FoodFirst clients had a sample size of 62, large enough to be considered a normal distribution and allowing for standard statistical analysis. An investigation of this FoodFirst client will therefore lend insight into the potential future user that will patronize Inter-Faith Council services.
HOUSING STATUS

In terms of the housing status and distribution of potential FoodFirst clients, Figure 9 illustrates that 50 percent reside in apartments either in Chapel Hill, Carrboro, Durham, Raleigh, Mebane, and Person County, with one visitor from Springfield, Missouri. In decreasing order, 18 percent of those surveyed responded with the “other” category and specified residence with friends or family, outside or “on the streets,” in a mobile home or vehicle, or in a local recovery center. Both house and shelter/camp categories received 13 percent of survey responses, while six percent of those surveyed reported residence in a rooming or boarding house (Figure 9).

EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS

From the 62 FoodFirst survey respondents, 42 percent (26 individuals) reported being employed while 58 percent (36 individuals) were unemployed at the time of the survey. Given the prevalent opinion that Community Kitchen users were largely unemployed, statistics like these suggest a range
of client employment situations. Of the 26 employed respondents, 15 reported part-time employment while 11 indicated full-time employment. The FoodFirst client employment sector histogram lends a distribution similar to that of all Community Kitchen survey respondents (Figure 10). The FoodFirst client employment sector distribution clearly shows a concentration of jobs in the trades and in restaurants. The “other” category encompasses the employment types discussed previously—traffic control, laundry, sound system set-up, odd jobs, and gymnasium. The employment sector distribution illustrates a variety of stereotypically low-wage and skilled fields, underscoring that, as asserted by Berner, Ozer, and Paynter, “employment is not an insurance policy against hunger” (2008, p. 413).

**MOTIVATION FOR VISITING THE KITCHEN**

While Berner, Ozer, and Paynter’s analysis of survey data in Iowa indicated specific motivations for client visitation to the food pantry—job loss, death of a family member, illness, loss of financial support—the Inter-Faith Council Community Kitchen survey took a more generalized approach to gauge both need and preference.

![FoodFirst Client Reason For Coming to the Kitchen (Duplicated)](image)

(Figure 11)

Potential survey responses ranged from need-based—“need Kitchen to get by,” “out of food,” and “lack of cooking facilities”—to those based upon a desire to come to the Kitchen for meals and community—“like to socialize” and “like Kitchen food.” An “other” category was also included to capture any additional motivations. As Figure 11 illustrates, Community Kitchen client motivations were varied and spanned both need and preference categories. It is important to note that this question allowed for duplicate responses; multiple respondents indicated both preference and
need to accurately account for the range of complicated and individualized motivations for seeking food assistance. 22 survey respondents indicated that they needed Kitchen meals to “Get by,” while 20 of those surveyed responded that they visited the Community Kitchen because they enjoyed the food. “Like to socialize” received 15 responses, and “Out of food” captured 10 responses; “Lack of facilities” and “Other”—“closer than church facilities”—received only nominal responses. Notably, 31 percent of FoodFirst clients indicated that Community Kitchen services were necessary for survival, demonstrating that food assistance services play a crucial role in the ability of local residents to make ends meet.

Perhaps surprising when compared to the Berner, Ozer, and Paynter research, 28 percent of respondents indicated that they visited the Kitchen because they enjoyed the food and 21 percent cited that they liked to socialize while dining. Survey results like these from potential FoodFirst clients indicate that there is an opportunity for increased community interaction at a future co-located food service center. Positive preference indicators have the ability to shift perception regarding the FoodFirst center from a “social service” to a community asset, transcending traditional negative connotations regarding food assistance providers and their clients.

**FREQUENCY OF KITCHEN VISITS**

While the Berner, Ozer, and Paynter study examined the frequency of food pantry client visitations, responses regarding the regularity of Community Kitchen patronages were far more frequent. Figure 12 illustrates the distribution of potential FoodFirst client responses regarding the frequency of visits to the Community Kitchen. The distribution clearly shows that the majority of FoodFirst clients visit the Kitchen either daily or weekly (Figure 12). 34 percent of survey respondents indicated daily visits, while 26 percent reported that they patronized the Kitchen weekly. While the survey did not include an explicit option to indicate multiple visits per week, this “weekly” category most likely captured clients who ate at the kitchen several times a week. This high rate of occurrence for daily and weekly visitations indicates that the Community Kitchen fills an important role in the ability of many local residents and employees to make ends meet while avoiding hunger.
While Figure 12 indicates a concentration of frequent Kitchen users, the “Occasional” and “When needed” Kitchen client responses indicate that such food assistance is also critical in filling temporary household and individual gaps. With 16 percent of potential FoodFirst client responses each, “When needed” and “Occasionally” categories demonstrate the necessity of food services in meeting temporary needs when hardships arise.

**TENURE OF KITCHEN VISITS**

As Berner, Ozer, and Paynter outlined in their case study of the Cedar Valley Food Pantry, clients were generally considered “emergency” or “supplemental” based upon the immediacy of their need and tenure of their assistance. As the Community Kitchen is open to the public and does not require any intake or procedures for food assistance, the “emergency” versus “supplemental” categorization is not as easily distinguishable.
Survey options regarding the length of Community Kitchen use addressed this issue in a non-categorical manner. Figure 13 illustrates the FoodFirst client responses to the question posed, “How long have you been coming to the Kitchen?” 39 percent of FoodFirst respondents indicated that they have been visiting the kitchen for “many years,” while 23 percent revealed that they only began visiting the Kitchen recently, perhaps a sign of recent economic hardships. With 24 “Many years” responses, such statistics indicate that commonly held perceptions regarding the nonexistence of hunger in Orange County are easily refuted. Such a distribution also indicates that the Community Kitchen fills various roles for clients—both chronic need for food and emergency assistance during unexpected hardship.

**ANTICIPATED TENURE OF FUTURE KITCHEN VISITS**

While the specific question of expected length of future use did not appear in the Cedar Valley Food Pantry survey, the general categories of emergency and supplemental assistance discussed earlier lend insight into the anticipated tenure of client services. Berner, Ozer, and Paynter state that though during the two-year survey period, 10 percent of emergency clients transitioned into supplemental users, an additional number of clients are constantly being added to the supplemental group, increasing the base of people dependent on the pantry for long-term supplemental food assistance (2008, p. 411). Without a consistent and long-term tracking program at the Community Kitchen, it is difficult to anticipate the tenure of service needed by the potential FoodFirst client; however, survey data can begin to illuminate the term of need the IFC could expect with future food services.
18 potential FoodFirst clients (29 percent) indicated that the Kitchen would “be important” to them forever, demonstrating the persistent and chronic nature of poverty and food insecurity (Figure 14). An equal number of survey respondents revealed that the Kitchen would be important “whenever…. [they]… need food,” a sign that food assistance often acts as a safety net when households and individuals face untimely hardships. 16 of the 62 surveyed reported (26 percent) that they believed the Kitchen would only be important “a little while longer,” perhaps indicating that the Kitchen was meeting a temporary need due to recent increased economic hardships. Several survey administrators did make note of “ideally” or “hopefully” next to this response, signifying that the tenure of need varies among food assistance users. As 10 respondents indicated that the Kitchen would be significant for a long time, patterns of the long-term, chronic food service use discussed by Berner, Ozer, and Paynter are further reinforced. Though the distribution seen in Figure 14 is not as conclusive as previously seen, it underscores that food assistance is often both an enduring need and, “ideally,” a temporary bridge.

**MODE OF TRANSPORTATION**

Though not addressed in the Cedar Valley Food Pantry case study, the mode of transportation Community Kitchen clients used to arrive at the Kitchen is a critical indicator in terms of the future FoodFirst center’s location. As seen in Figure 15, 50 percent of survey respondents arrived at the Kitchen by bus, while 26 percent walked. 14 percent of those surveyed drove a vehicle, eight percent got a ride, and a slight two percent biked to the Kitchen (Figure 15). With
free bus service in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, local leaders questioned the necessity for a central or downtown FoodFirst location, arguing that bus service equated to convenient accessibility (J. Brandes, & R. Winterberg-Lipp, personal communication, July 2008). With clear dependence on public transportation, a frequency of both bus service and bus routes will be crucial in siting the future FoodFirst center.

ADDITIONAL CLIENT INTERESTS
In order to gauge interests regarding a mix of services and amenities at the future FoodFirst center, the IFC Community Kitchen survey included questions aimed at anticipating client need and preference. When asked “Would you be interested in getting groceries if we provided them?” 79 percent of potential FoodFirst clients responded positively, demonstrating that, as discussed by Berner et al., food insecure clients often rely on a variety of sources for assistance to make ends meet (2008, p. 416). Such a response also underscores that the majority of Kitchen clients are housed since they would require cooking facilities to make use of the grocery items. In terms of the interest expressed in additional services and amenities, Figure 16 illustrates a definitive interest in Food Stamp assistance with 34 percent of potential FoodFirst clients selecting this option. Cooking classes received 27 percent of potential FoodFirst client interest, while nutrition and recipes received 14 and 15 survey responses respectfully (Figure 16). Survey responses like these reinforce the organizational motivation for the proposed co-located FoodFirst center—that Community Kitchen clients express interest and need in additional food assistance—while also demonstrating Berner, Ozer, and Paynter’s assertions that food insecure clients often seek assistance.
Setting the Table Straight

assistance at multiple levels from various sources (2008, p. 416).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Though often lauded as an idyllic community filled with opportunity, Chapel Hill’s poor and hungry find support and nourishment nestled amongst the downtown’s historic buildings and picturesque landscapes. Though located in the heart of the community, the Inter-Faith Council’s clientele are often misunderstood and stigmatized by local officials, government staff, and businesspeople. Misconceptions regarding the pervasiveness of poverty and hunger in Orange County, the root causes of need, and the characteristics of social service users threaten to undermine the IFC’s ability to provide for a growing and shifting underserved population. With these issues in mind, why do individuals and households in Orange County need food assistance? How do they fill their budget gaps? Who does the IFC serve? Who will the IFC serve in the future?

An exploration of working poverty revealed that with the falling value of wages coupled with rising household costs, many hard working individuals and families may never rise above the poverty level, much less reach a comfortable living standard. While the average adult in a low-income working family worked the equivalent of one and quarter full-time jobs, such typical service-based professions may always fail to provide a living wage. Insufficient income often translates into food-insecurity and hunger for many individuals and families, a gap that is frequently filled by nonprofit food assistance providers given the inadequacies of the public support system.

With the recent economic downturn and rising unemployment, food assistance providers like the Inter-Faith Council are facing increased demand, both from new and existing clients. In the current economic climate, the food insecurity experienced by almost 13 percent of North Carolinians from 2005 to 2007 seems likely to increase. Coupled with Orange County’s increasing unemployment and already high cost of living, the future IFC FoodFirst Center could experience unprecedented demand, playing a greater role in the lives of local residents and employees. The IFC’s ambitious plans for social service reorganization require a clear portrait of client characteristics and needs, both in order to educate the
public about the true nature of hardship in Orange County and aid in the design of future programs and services.

While there is little data available to social service providers to lend insight into populations they serve, case studies like the Cedar Valley Food Pantry offer a glimpse into the profile of the food assistance user. While the study examined food pantry clients as opposed to soup kitchen users, the Berner et al. conclusions are still significant for the Inter-Faith Council in that the co-located FoodFirst center will focus on serving the wide range of client food needs to include hot meals and groceries. The Cedar Valley survey revealed that receiving Food Stamp assistance did not reduce the need for private food assistance, underscoring the ingrained and persistent hardships that require many individuals and families to seek assistance from various sources. While client professions spanned both low-wage and skilled professions, Berner et al. concluded that “employment is not an insurance policy against hunger” (2008, pp. 411, 413).

From Inter-Faith Council program report data, an increase in demand has occurred across the spectrum of IFC services. With an 11 percent increase in meals served at the Community kitchen and an over 17 percent increase in grocery bags distributed from December 2007 to December 2008, Orange County residents and employees are clearly facing greater hardships and are seeking assistance to fill the gaps. Most notably, however, Food Pantry household membership increased over 75 percent during the same period, indicating that perhaps housed clients—those with access to cooking facilities—are feeling the effects of the economic downturn the hardest. With such increases in need, a clear understanding of the Inter-Faith Council’s client is more critical than ever.

Based upon the survey conducted at the Community Kitchen in March of 2009, the profile of the potential future FoodFirst client emerges. Though the FoodFirst profile is approximate since homeless residents of the Community House could not be completely isolated, the survey results offer insights into Kitchen clients’ characteristics and needs.

While it is often assumed that all IFC clients are homeless, 63 percent of potential FoodFirst clients rent an apartment or own their own home. Other respondents indicated tenuous living situations like staying with friends or relatives, in
vehicles, or in boarding houses—clients that could be on the brink of homelessness, relying on IFC food assistance as a mechanism to prevent going over the edge. Employment data also quickly dispelled a common misconception: that all Community Kitchen clients are unemployed. While the rate of employment was lower than IFC staff expected perhaps due to recent job losses, 42 percent of potential FoodFirst clients were employed in various skilled and low-wage sectors. Figures like these underscore that the Inter-Faith Council serves Orange County’s working poor, individuals and families who may never be able to make ends meet in a service-based economy with high university support fields like janitorial, health care, and construction.

Survey results revealed that over 31 percent of Kitchen clients indicated they “Need the Kitchen to Get By,” demonstrating that food assistance plays a crucial role in the ability of Orange County residents and employees to make ends meet. Positive preference indicators like enjoying Kitchen food and socializing at meal time demonstrate that a new FoodFirst center has the potential to shift negative perception regarding social service provision. Such responses indicate that the center could be viewed as a community asset as opposed to a blight that attracts negative attention and a harmful population.

High rates of frequent patronage reinforce that the IFC’s food assistance fills a crucial gap in the lives of many local residents and employees. The Kitchen’s downtown location and close proximity to the University of North Carolina could potentially support these frequent users who use the Kitchen to make ends meet. The survey also revealed that almost 40 percent of respondents indicated they have been visiting the Kitchen for many years, further emphasizing that food assistance is often a long term need in the overall situation of working poverty. The 23 percent of respondents who indicated that they began visiting the Kitchen recently also highlight the rapidly growing needs of the community in times of economic hardship.

Regarding client anticipated future needs, 29 percent of potential FoodFirst respondents indicated that Kitchen services would be important to them forever, reinforcing the persistent and chronic nature of poverty and food insecurity. An equal 29 percent of FoodFirst clients responded that the Kitchen would be important “Whenever I Need Food,” rep-
Setting the Table Straight

representing the emergency clients who seek food assistance during times of unexpected hardship. Inquiries into additional client interests revealed that an overwhelming percentage of potential FoodFirst clients were interested in Food Stamps, indicative of the wide gaps in individual and household budgets that must often be filled by multiple sources of assistance. Positive preference indicators of interest in cooking classes, nutrition, and recipes also revealed future opportunities to expand food assistance services to address food issues holistically.

Based upon the Cedar Valley Food Pantry case study and data collected from the Community Kitchen survey, two clear populations of potential FoodFirst clients emerge: long term users who experience persistent poverty and food insecurity, and emergency clients who make use of IFC services in times of unexpected hardship. Despite high rates of traditional housing status and employment, these clients are not isolated from hunger and food insecurity. While their individual and household situations are undoubtedly varied and ever-changing, Orange County’s high cost of living and frequency of service-based and low-wage university professions, coupled with rising unemployment, result in an economic situation where many find themselves teetering on the edge of homelessness.

In a rapidly declining economy that is expected to take years to recover, who will the IFC serve in a co-located food service center? Though predicting an ever-changing clientele may not be possible, Food Pantry membership growth indicates that more traditionally housed and employed Orange County residents and employees may seek IFC services in the future. With rising unemployment in typically skilled and moderately paying jobs like construction and manufacturing, the IFC may see an increase in clients who have unexpectedly found themselves on the edge of poverty and homelessness. While new client growth is expected to continue, existing and long term client needs may increase, as well, with rising consumer costs and the decline in the real value of wages.

Without a large homeless clientele, the FoodFirst center will undoubtedly serve not only a different demographic, but one that will shift as perceptions of the facility change among potential food assistance users. While the current Community Kitchen is frequented by the homeless residents
Setting the Table Straight

of Community House, a potential deterrent for families, FoodFirst’s emphasis on meals and groceries in a community atmosphere will likely attract a wider range of clients. Though data analysis and an initial survey of Community Kitchen clients have begun to address some of the common misconceptions that exist regarding food assistance user characteristics, motivations, and needs, future exploration is critical in both dispelling negative perceptions and designing an appropriate FoodFirst center. Given the ever-changing population that utilizes the Community Kitchen, seasonal usage patterns may reveal different client characteristics and needs. Increasing unemployment will also alter the profile of the Community Kitchen client over the course of the FoodFirst planning phase. With these reasons in mind, additional client surveys at the Community Kitchen are critical in developing a clear portrait of the IFC client. Coupled with analysis from the existing Food Pantry client database, the Inter-Faith Council will be able to demystify the common misconceptions and negative perceptions that exist in the community regarding poverty, hunger, and social service users.

Specific questions that should be addressed in future surveys include a definitive isolation of Community House residents versus the public Community Kitchen clientele. While the initial Community Kitchen survey was able to address these different populations to some extent, it was not completely possible to offer a definitive portrait of the future FoodFirst user. Identifying individuals who are recently unemployed or underemployed will also be critical in demonstrating a growing food assistance need in Orange County and should be included in further surveys. With the Community Kitchen’s proximity to the University of North Carolina, identifying employees of the UNC system—custodial staff, health care support, and grounds keepers—or related fields like construction, will aid the IFC in planning services for specific working populations. With its strong presence in the Triangle’s employment landscape, the interconnectedness of UNC’s labor policies and wages cannot be ignored when addressing issues of working poverty. Finally, the initial survey began to explore issues of location by addressing client transportation modes. The apparent high reliance on public transportation for accessing food assistance underscores that a centrally-located FoodFirst facility is key. While negative connotations regarding food assistance will be an issue in siting the new center, the overall public educa-
Though the IFC is not able to address the larger systematic conditions that have led to such widespread working poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity, it will be able to serve hungry local residents and employees more effectively through food service consolidation. One-stop access to groceries and hot meals with other supportive services may be the deciding factor that keeps an individual or family from becoming homeless. These individual interventions will have immense importance in a declining economic situation that cannot be addressed by food assistance providers alone. The IFC’s efforts to dispel the misconceptions regarding food assistance users, however, will have lasting impacts on the way Orange County elected officials, staff, business owners, and employers perceive and address need in the community. With the ability to address hardship at the local level, these stakeholders will be able to translate such findings into farther-reaching policies and programs in support of the IFC’s mission to better provide for the community as a whole.
Works Cited


Appendix A

Survey For Community Kitchen

You may know that the IFC is planning to move the Community Kitchen and Men’s Shelter to separate locations. We would like to combine the Kitchen with the Food Pantry in one building. We believe this will strengthen our services. Here are some of the improvements that we would like to make:

- More storage for food donations
- More dining room space for our guests
- Those using the Food Pantry will be able to receive hot meals three times every day at no cost
- Those using the Kitchen will be able to apply for Food Pantry services
- Other benefits such as holiday meals, cooking classes, food stamps, WIC and gardening programs could be offered to local households and homeless persons

We are not certain where the Kitchen and Food Pantry will move, but we do know both will stay in operation and may wind up having even better things to offer. IFC leaders are currently looking for a good location. We are interested in knowing more about our guests so we can serve you better. Your opinions matter to us and we were wondering if you could help us by answering a few questions.

Some of these questions may ask personal information about your job or where you live. Your answers will help us understand who visits the kitchen and why. You will not have to give your name for this survey and your answers will be confidential. You don’t have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with, but your answers are very important to us.
1. Gender:  ☐ Male  ☐ Female

2. What town do you live in?
☐ Chapel Hill  ☐ Carrboro  ☐ Durham  ☐ Other: ________________________________

3. Describe the type of dwelling you live in:
☐ Apartment I rent  ☐ House I own  ☐ Shelter or camp  ☐ Rooming/boarding house
☐ Other: ________________________________

4. Are you employed? (If NO, skip ahead to question 7):  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

5. Full Time or Part-Time?:  ☐ Full Time  ☐ Part Time

6. What kind of job do you have?
☐ Retail/sales  ☐ Health care  ☐ Restaurant  ☐ Schools  ☐ Trades
☐ Maintenance/housekeeping  ☐ Other: ________________________________

7. What is the main reason you come to the Community Kitchen?
☐ Lack of cooking facilities/utilities  ☐ Out of food  ☐ Like to come/socialize  ☐ Like Kitchen food
☐ Need Kitchen to get by  ☐ Other: ________________________________

8. How often do you come to the kitchen?
☐ Daily  ☐ Weekly  ☐ Monthly  ☐ Occasionally  ☐ When needed

9. How long have you been coming to the kitchen?
☐ New/recent  ☐ Many months  ☐ More than one year  ☐ Many years

10. Do you think the kitchen will be important to you:
☐ A little while longer  ☐ For a long time  ☐ Whenever I need food  ☐ Forever

11. How did you get here today?
☐ Walked  ☐ Bus  ☐ Drove  ☐ Got a ride  ☐ Rode my bike  ☐ Other: ________________________________

12. Would you be interested in getting groceries if we provided them?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

13. What other food programs would you be interested in?
☐ Cooking classes  ☐ Food stamps  ☐ Nutrition  ☐ Recipes  ☐ Other: ________________________________

Thanks for taking the time to share your opinions with us. Once all the information is pulled together, we will get back to you about our plans and what will be happening as we look ahead into the future.

Surveyor Name: ________________________________  Date: ________________________________

Time survey was conducted (Circle One):  ☐ Breakfast  ☐ Lunch  ☐ Dinner