

# **The Disappearance of the Middle Class in America: Evidence from Overwhelmed Community Nonprofits**

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## **Abstract**

In the United States, the strains from the recession are evident from standard government data on unemployment and participation in government social safety net systems. Researchers often rely on these data because they are easily and quickly tracked. Yet they are limited because they consistently underestimate need due to eligibility requirements based on flawed measures of poverty. A better measure may be one based on data from community food assistance nonprofits, often the first stop for people in need. As an example, this paper presents original data on dramatic growth in demand at community-level food pantries across North Carolina since the 1990s, with food pantries often now rationing food or running out. Additional analyses with data from the Current Population Survey from 2003 to 2011 show up to 33 percent of North Carolinians would be considered “needy” by the nonprofit sector. Using this measure, the problem is much worse than official government figures suggest—a large portion of society that had once been considered middle class now finds itself searching for food to meet basic family needs. A call for additional research on US economic condition using measures of material need is made.

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One of the fundamental questions of public policy is, “What is our current economic condition?”, whether that reflects a community, state or province, sub-national region, nation, or the international community. In the United States, economic condition debates have taken on an unusual level of importance in the past five years in two main ways. First, the 99/1 percent protests, or Occupy Movement, of 2011 and 2012 showed discussions of income inequality have finally resonated with the general public. Second, the Great Recession had a society-wide impact.

Both events highlighted individuals’ situations. Did someone in the family lose a job or were now long-time unemployed? Did a family that had seemed stable now face foreclosure on its home? As researchers, we tend to concentrate on the aggregate data from individuals to reflect society-wide conditions. GDP growth was monitored, of course, but only as an entry into questions about the pace of job growth and the types of jobs lost and gained.

In the past five years, media has focused on broad measures of income for the inequality debates and unemployment, poverty rates, or participation rates in social safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, to demonstrate the impact of the recession. As will be discussed below, however, using income data only reflects one available resource to a family, not whether that income (or other resources) is sufficient to survive.

In addition, program participation data underestimates need because the eligibility criterion, poverty status using the formal US federal definition, has long been recognized itself as an underestimate and a flawed measure. And by concentrating on these programs, we capture the stress felt only by those meeting the low-threshold program criteria, the poorest of the poor, by definition missing important information on the impact of the recession on the middle class.

Finally, government data do not capture the extensive work done by the nonprofit sector in meeting basic human needs—needs that are not met by the traditional social safety net. Research that focuses on the standard government program data to the exclusion of parallel data from the nonprofit sector may be recommending policy choices with only half the picture. Is there an approach that could provide the missing half of the picture, allowing us to better understand the history and extent of economic hardship overall, an approach that is not self-limiting? What we need to know is, can people meet basic household needs?

This information is vital for national policy-makers. Poverty is a term that now seems relegated to well-intentioned nonprofits and social scientists, but income inequality has taken on a new status of national importance with the recognition by the business sector that it is impacting national growth and tax revenues across the board (Standard & Poor's Rating Services 2014). Economic hardship is not just for the poor to worry about anymore.

This paper takes two approaches to this question with an example. First, we explore data from the nonprofit sector at the community level that would indicate the ability of families to meet basic needs over the past two decades. In this case, we focus on bags or boxes of groceries given out by food pantries at churches and other street-level charities in North Carolina. Second, we merge the view of nonprofits and government data by applying the criteria used by these food pantries to detailed Current Population Survey data in thirty-seven states for 2003–11 to understand what portion of the population would be considered “needy” if the nonprofit version of the poverty line were used. Together these descriptive data should contribute to our understanding of the extent of economic hardship before and after the Great Recession. In addition, it brings the US closer to the alternative views of measuring economic condition of communities being explored by other nations.

Our specific research questions are:

1. Using the example of nonprofit food pantry usage data, what can we discern about the pattern of economic hardship in the US prior to and after the Great Recession? How does this correspond to government program data more commonly used to indicate economic condition?
2. What percentage of the population in the United States would be considered needy using common food pantry eligibility criteria? How do those percentages compare with the percentages of the population under the current federal poverty thresholds?

Before presenting those data, we summarize the current commentary on economic hardship and describe current measures; describe the nonprofit data, sources, and how the data are gathered; and discuss subsequent limitations. We then address the research questions and end with a consideration of what this information adds to the current public policy debate around individual and families' economic security—or lack thereof.

### **Current Views on Measuring Poverty**

In the United States, most public policy conversations around poverty default to the federal definition without establishing an independent assessment of what it means to be “poor.” The federal definition was established in the mid 1960s and has been clearly denounced as a flawed measure for decades. Early efforts to improve on the measure included work such as the Ricketts and Sawhill definition of “the underclass” in 1988, but a true government-wide attempt to revise the poverty definition did not take place until 1995 with a National Academy of Science panel study titled *Measuring Poverty: A New Approach*, which produced recommendations (Citro and Michael 1995). Based on those recommendations, experimental poverty measures

have been tested (Olsen 1999) and a Supplemental Poverty Measure, which included the impact of government assistance, was finally produced by the Census Bureau in 2012.

Additional efforts have been made to develop state or local specific measures such as the Wisconsin Poverty Measure developed by Chung, Isaacs, and Smeeding (2013). As Chung et al. state, despite the need for an improved measure for poverty, “[T]he technical difficulties involved, such as the lack of data and techniques needed to identify accurate information about comprehensive needs and resources, make the analysis expensive and impede research on this topic” (526). For the most part, these efforts seek to statistically refine and localize the more broadly used measures, using methods that one could argue go beyond the capacity of the local practitioners to calculate and use.

There has been a growing body of work around the need to use multi-dimensional measures of poverty, although they tend to come from an international perspective, with the most important contribution probably being the discussions included in the 2012 volume *Counting the Poor: New Thinking About European Poverty Measures and Lessons for the United States* (Besharov and Couch, eds), especially the material addressing the idea poverty through a lens of resources (income, U.S. based conceptualization) versus social exclusion (European based conceptualization). (For other examples of these issues also see Callander et al. 2012; Bossert et al. 2013; Minujin et al. 2014; Mitra et al. 2014). Meyer and Sullivan (2012) present an important alternative to traditional research using poverty rates by a consumption-based approach, with a very thorough discussion on its advantages over the income-based model. Using their approach, poverty overall (poverty meaning economic hardship as opposed to the poverty rate specifically) actually improved. Like income, however, the consumption-based model falls short because it measures what is actually consumed, not what is still needed.

What is important about this entire discussion is a growing emphasis on living condition. Material well-being is the key, as was discussed twenty years ago in the Measuring Poverty study (Citro and Michael 1995, 212). We have measures that use resources or document consumption, but not the gap left that prevents individuals and families from a particular acceptable standard of living. This paper argues that the current efforts to measure material deprivation are the next step, and that having sufficient food is a basic feature of a basic living standard.

### **Proposed Measure: Food Pantry Usage**

Food insecurity, measured through a series of eighteen questions on an annual survey, has come into increased focus as an alternative and perhaps more appropriate measure of need (Bartfeld and Dunifon 2006). The questions try to address whether a family can provide enough nutritious food on a regular basis for an active, healthy lifestyle. Generally, food insecurity estimates show higher levels of need than poverty rates. In fact, analyses show a significant portion, approximately a third, of those considered food-insecure have an income too high to qualify for US federal benefits. Yet food insecurity alone may not be showing the complete picture. While closer to our goal, it could be improved upon.

This paper proposes local nonprofit food assistance demand as an important supplement to current poverty measures, whether based on income, consumption, or food insecurity. Data on nonprofit food assistance distribution can increase our understanding of societal well-being in several ways. One of the main criticisms of national measures is the inability to control for variation in local cost of living. This suggests a better measure is one that is not monetarily based

and/or takes into account such variation—one that is meaningful in a local context but comparable. As stated by Craw (2010), “Poverty in the United States is as much a local problem as a national one” (906). Using pounds of food distributed indirectly incorporates both differences in cost of living and income as well as other financial resources in an area.

When households are unable to meet current need, they turn to food pantries to fill the gap (Fries et al. 2014). As described by Wakefield et al. (2013), food banks and pantries have become an institutionalized means to address hunger. Therefore, demand on food pantries reflects true need better than either income- or consumption-based approaches. In this way, it is an approach very much in line with Amartya Sen’s “capability approach” to poverty analysis (Hick 2012). It also avoids the problem of uncertainty of “poverty versus preference” that plagues consumption-based models (Hick 2013). Those who seek nonprofit food assistance clearly are seeking such aid due to poverty—a need that is not met through personal means or government social safety net programs—rather than simply opting for a low-consumption lifestyle.

Finally, although nonprofit food assistance is a purely community-based measure, it is relatively comparable across geography and time and already gathered by the nonprofit agencies involved without the need for additional surveys or tools. Food banks and pantries across the United States track demand in terms of pounds of food distributed in day-to-day inventory management. Measures of demand are relatively consistent and easy to understand and record, regardless of location. A family needs a certain amount of food whether it resides in Santa Monica, California; Athens, Georgia; or Marfa, Texas.

Access to sufficient food for a household could be a compelling measure of material sufficiency or deprivation, one that reflects the complexity of need that cannot be shown with

current income-based measures. It is one of the few household items needed on a daily basis. It is not a purchase that can be delayed or avoided in the long term, thus reflecting real-time need. If there were a gap between cost of living and incomes or other resources, the need for nonprofit food assistance would rise, reflected in the pounds of food being distributed by community food assistance efforts.

There are two main limitations to this measure. As need has grown, evidence is also growing that the food supply on which the food banks and pantries rely is running out. With a limited supply, assistance is rationed by either reducing the amount of food each family receives at each visit or reducing the number of visits allowed. If there is regional variation in the supply of food, the reliability of food supply as a generalizable measure is reduced. In areas with stronger donation systems, increases in food distribution reflect true community needs, while those areas that run out of food would show a flattening of demand that is masking true need.

Secondly, at this time, to the author's knowledge, there is no systematic poundage reporting structure above the pantry level, so widespread use of this measure depends on such a system being established or on individual efforts to gather such data directly. And while pounds of food distributed is a fairly clear measure, there will naturally be variation in the quality, consistency, and accessibility in how each pantry records the data. Many food pantries do not keep electronic records—according to one study only about one half of pantries in North Carolina, for example, have access to a computer at all. However, the same study shows pantries do keep records, historically on paper but more often now electronically (Paynter and Berner 2014).

## **Nonprofit Food Assistance Context**



A general description of the nonprofit food assistance system is necessary context for this analysis. In the United States, food banks serve as central food distribution centers for member agencies that include pantries, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, after-school and day care programs, summer meal programs, domestic violence shelters, nonprofit nursing homes, and other community-based nonprofit social service agencies. They receive food items, farm produce, and money from a variety of sources, including all levels of government. The food bank serves as a warehouse for a region. Small nonprofits are members, allowing them to purchase food from the food bank for pennies on the dollar. Van Steen and Pellenbarg (2014) provide a wonderful concise history of food banks:

Although the act of sharing and giving away food is very old, the first so-called “food bank” was founded in 1967 in the United States by John van Hengel, of Dutch ancestry. Inspired by a mother of 10 children that pointed out there should be a “bank of food” to deposit and take out food, he established the “St. Mary’s Food Bank” in Phoenix, Arizona (*The Washington Post* [2005](#)). Quickly, more food banks were started . . . . However, with severe budget cuts for social policies implemented by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s, hunger again came to the forefront and many new food banks were founded. The same happened in many other countries in the 1980s. Since then, the number of food banks has grown enormously. Holt-Giménez and Patel ([2012](#), 9) speak of an “explosion of (...) food banks and food pantries” in the late 2000s. (370)

This is the typical process: A representative of a member agency might come from a small town to the food bank once a month with a truck, select items from what the food bank has available in its warehouse, and pay by the pound. The truck will return to the small town pantry,

supplement what the food bank provided with local donations, and may even use financial contributions to purchase food directly from a local grocery store to fill in gaps. The local pantry would be open a day or two a week. Clients come to the pantry, often lining up early to ensure they can receive food before supplies run out, or if given the opportunity to choose food themselves, will want to be first to choose key desirable items (meat, bread, produce) before they are gone. They are checked in, the vast majority with some form of eligibility paperwork, referral system or application process, and are often required to prove after the initial visit that they have applied for government assistance.

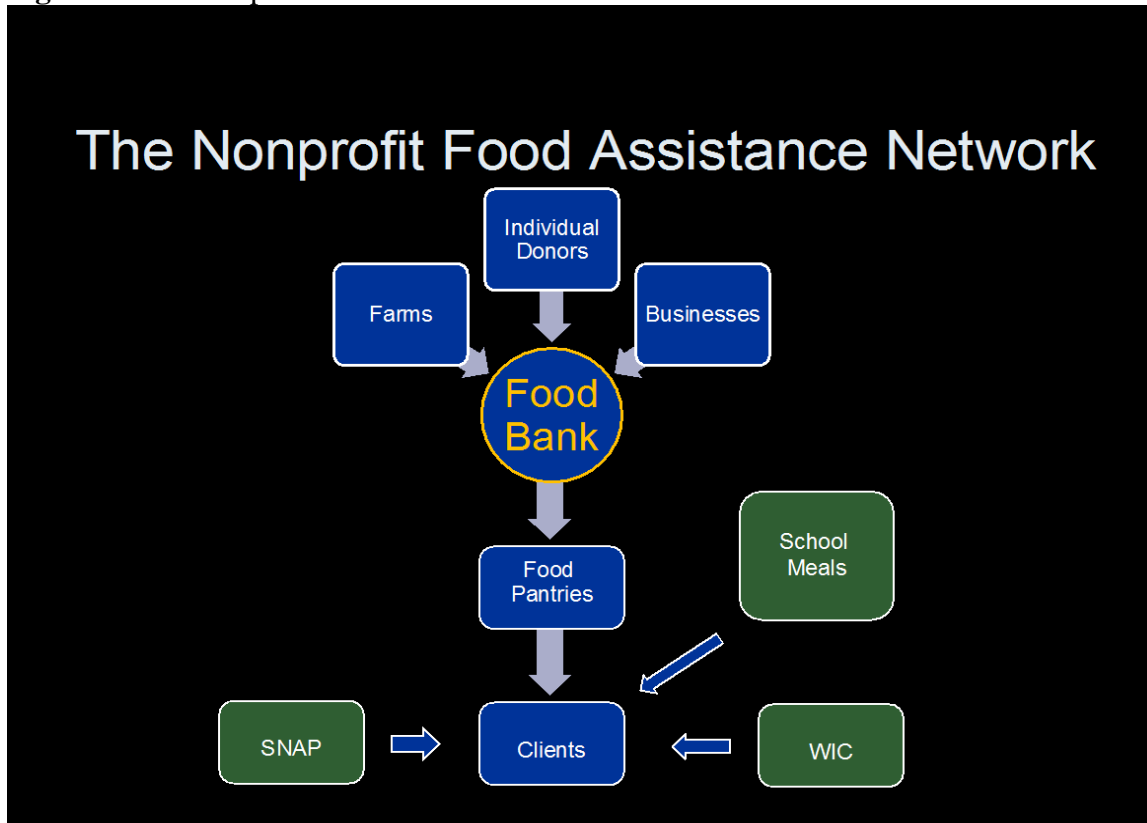
This is a general description and is only illustrative. Most community-level nonprofit agencies such as food pantries are established and run independently of significant government oversight, involvement, or formal coordination. They may belong to larger professional associations. Some pantries are large and sophisticated organizations; many others are small, volunteer-only organizations (Fiese et al. 2014). The majority are affiliated with a religious institution.

Food pantries tend to be invisible. While well known to the local social services providers in communities, there is relatively little academic research on the local level nonprofit food assistance network (an exception might be Downing and Kennedy 2013). Research is growing primarily through public health work focused on nutrition and food access, and there are calls for better understanding their impact (See for example, Collins et al. 2014; Kuhls et al. 2012; and Neter et al. 2014). Yet the network of food pantries is huge. The most recent Hunger in America study by Feeding America, the national nonprofit representing Food Banks and their member agencies, reports over 40,000 community pantries nationwide, compared to the over 2,500 urban municipal governments reporting providing any direct social welfare program in

2002 (Craw 2010). Pantries exist in virtually every community. In 2009, 33 million individuals used food pantries in the U.S. (Fiese et al. 2014).

Clients may or may not get additional benefits from other government programs. In fact, prior research demonstrated that less than half of food pantry clients were eligible for government programs and a measurable number of pantry clients or those deemed food-insecure are employed (Berner and Paynter 2008; McIntyre et al. 2014). Figure 1 depicts the overall food assistance process, including government programs, but in this paper, we focus on the nonprofit food bank/pantry–client relationship only.

**Figure 1.** The Nonprofit Food Assistance Network



## Methodology

To answer the first research question, longitudinal data on usage were gathered for one major food bank in the eastern United States, the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina (FBCENC) on the US east coast and one of its member pantries, the CORA food pantry in Pittsboro, NC, a small town in a rural area located approximately 30 miles from the university town of Chapel Hill and about 40 miles from the military population-heavy area of Fayetteville, NC. The data from the Food Bank represents the total food dispersed across its approximately 450 member pantries in 34 counties, a full population of its membership, covering over a third of the state, some of the most populous areas with major universities (Duke, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, North Carolina Central University) and the state Capitol, as well as extensive rural areas with extreme poverty in former tobacco dependent areas which are now home to major chicken and pork processing industries.

The data represent the two standard measures of demand—pounds of food distributed, as described above, or number of families served. The data presented here are only examples of the data that exist throughout the United States within the nonprofit system. For purposes of this paper, the data presented is illustrative only but reflect trends observed by the researchers in multiple nonprofits.

To answer our second research question, gaining an understanding of what a “nonprofit” poverty line would imply for measuring economic hardship in the United States, we must establish what the line is and apply it broadly to available data. In this case, we use the eligibility criteria established by food pantries and apply it to income data for thirty-seven states for 2003 through 2011.

To establish the nonprofit poverty line, we turned to interviews and survey data based on prior research around food banks and pantries in North Carolina. Food bank officials state that,

in general, member pantries will not turn away anyone seeking assistance the first time. However, most pantries apply established eligibility criteria before distributing food to individual client households on a regular basis, and in some cases, even at the time of a first visit. In many cases, this means the client must provide either a referral from an established social service agency that is already checking for eligibility for government assistance or from a church or trusted community organization who conducts a screening process. This does not mean households must actually qualify for government assistance. In fact, many pantry clients do not qualify for government assistance, but still need help, as discussed above. However, overall, pantries want to see evidence that clients are seeking official assistance before turning to the nonprofits as a regular supplement.

Is there a common “poverty line” across the disparate pantries? It is important to remember that individual pantries are independent. Each has its own policies and criteria, and some of these are not relevant to this discussion, such as limiting distribution to those living within a service area. However, informal interviews with food bank and selected pantries over the past decade suggest community nonprofits tend to settle on a point equivalent to approximately 180 percent of the US federal poverty line. The interviews focused on what seemed to be an appropriate income for survival for the community in which the pantry existed, thus indirectly acknowledging the local cost of living.

This amount, then—180 percent of the federal poverty line—becomes our nonprofit poverty line. It is important to emphasize this is based on North Carolina data and is therefore most relevant for this state. Also, while referencing that this level is approximately 180 percent of the federal poverty line to communicate the level more easily, it was established independent of the federal poverty line. Therefore the methodological flaws in calculating the federal poverty

line should not be assumed to carry over to our nonprofit poverty measure. Of course, there are inherent flaws to any measure and these are discussed in the limitations section below.

First, we calculated this line for each state and family size for thirty-seven states and the United States as a whole. Data problems were encountered with thirteen states, but should be resolved with further analysis.<sup>2</sup> The line was then applied to reported income data from 2003–11 for household sizes of one to nine members. Income data were obtained from the Current Population Survey. Second, we need to know how many people are in income brackets split by a threshold but still under the threshold itself. For CPS income bands that are split by the 180 percent income thresholds, an even population distribution within the band was assumed and included the population in equal proportion to where the band is split. In some years for certain states, there were significant missing data for larger household sizes. In those situations only data on one to four member households was used, but this occurred in a limited number of state-years. In these cases, the percentages were slightly less than one would expect, due to higher poverty levels in larger households, discussed below. In general the patterns were maintained.

## **Results**

### **What Has Been the Pattern of Economic Hardship in the US Prior to and after the Great Recession?**

The data trends in figures 2 and 3 below represent the level of service provided by one small pantry and one large food bank from the 1990s through FY 2013–14. In both cases, demand rose dramatically well before the current recession. In fact, demand starts escalating in

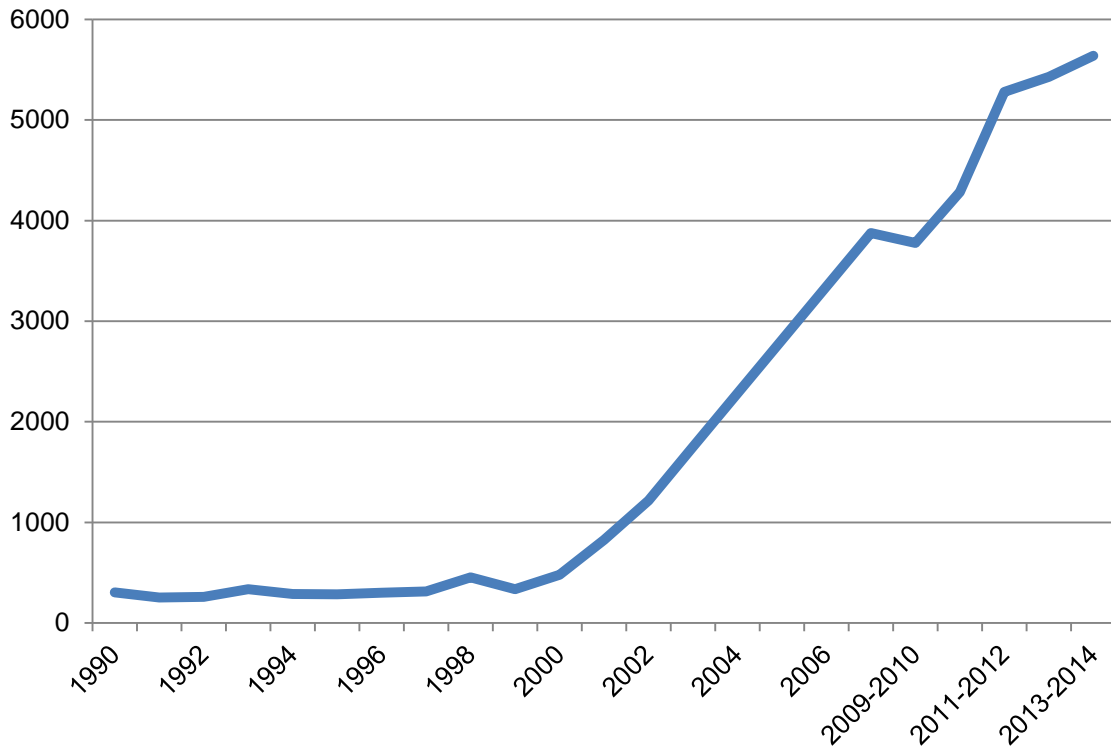
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<sup>2</sup> Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina.

the late 1990s and continues to grow at relatively high rates. In a 2012 Brookings Paper on Economic Activity, Meyer and Sullivan argue that using consumption-based measures of poverty, “We may not yet have won the war on poverty, but we are certainly winning” (177). These data contradict that view, suggesting not only that need has not fallen, but that, in fact, it is growing at dramatic rates. Both official income and consumption measures may be missing the big picture.

In the case of CORA, the smaller food pantry in rural North Carolina, demand has risen almost 500 percent in the past decade. In the case of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, starting from a larger base, in the same time period, demand doubled. It is important to note the overall growth pattern is continuous, not leveling off for any significant time period. Based on discussions with the pantry and food bank director involved, indications of slower growth recently may also be due to a lack of supply rather than a slow-down in growth in demand. Service delivery has slowed because across nonprofits, capacity is limited. While they don’t like to describe it as such, the organizations are running out of food, turning to rationing by reducing the amount of food each family can receive per visit or limiting service area or days of operation. CORA now relies on cash purchases of discounted foods for 60 percent of its food delivered because actual food donations are insufficient to meet demand.

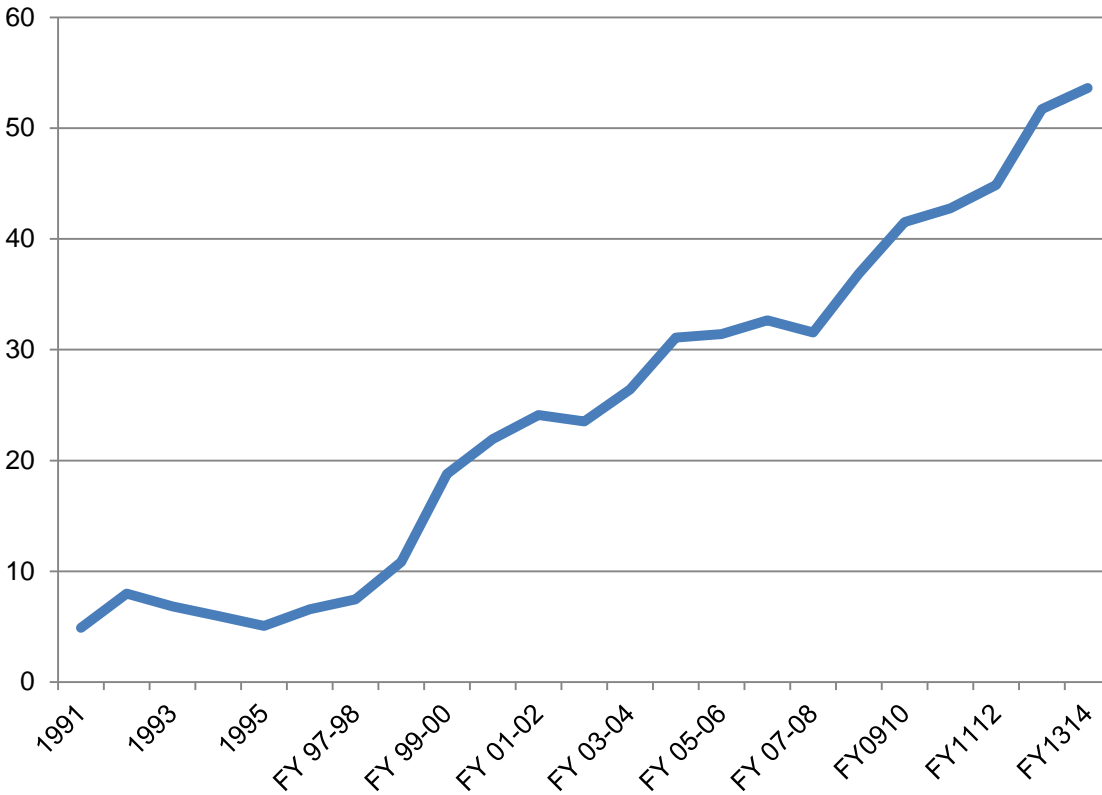
**Figure 2.** Cora Food Pantry, Pittsboro, NC, Number of Families Served, 1990–2014



*Source:* Author calculations based on data provided by CORA Food Pantry. Note missing data between 2002 and 2006 were replaced with extrapolation.

**Figure 3.** Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC Total Food Distribution, 1991–2014 (Millions of Pounds)



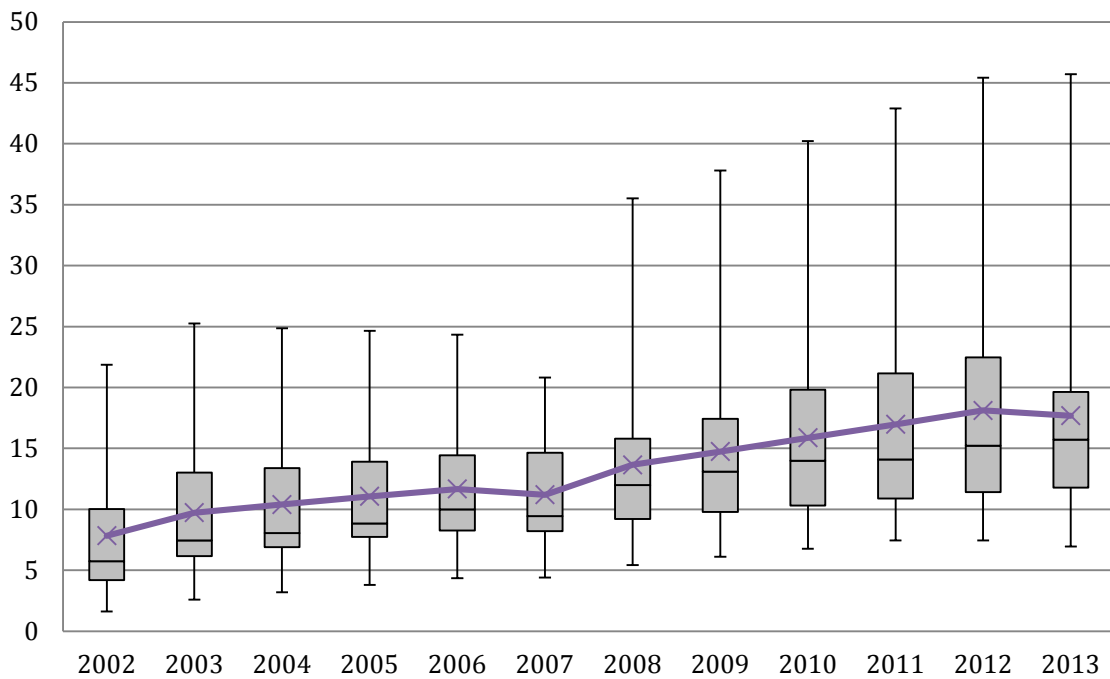


Source: Author calculations based on data provided by FBCENC.

It should be noted that both nonprofits have increased capacity at times over the years to meet unmet demand. Overall, however, there appears to be a constant supply constraint. More compelling is the following figure, showing the distribution of per capita food distribution, in pounds, across the 34 member counties of the FBCENC from six years prior to the Great Recession to the present. Around 450 individual pantries are distributed across the 34 members counties, from small to large, in general mirroring the population size/urbanization of the county in question. It is important to remember these data are per capita for the county and not the client population, reflecting both a possible increase in the number of clients as well as higher need per client. The same overall trend is seen in these more detailed data. While the line is not as dramatic due to a wide dispersion, the average per capita doubled between 2002 and 2014.

The fall in 2007 may have been due to a lack of adequate supply at the beginning of the recession.

**Figure 4.** Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC, Per Capita Distribution in Pounds of Food by County, 2002–2013

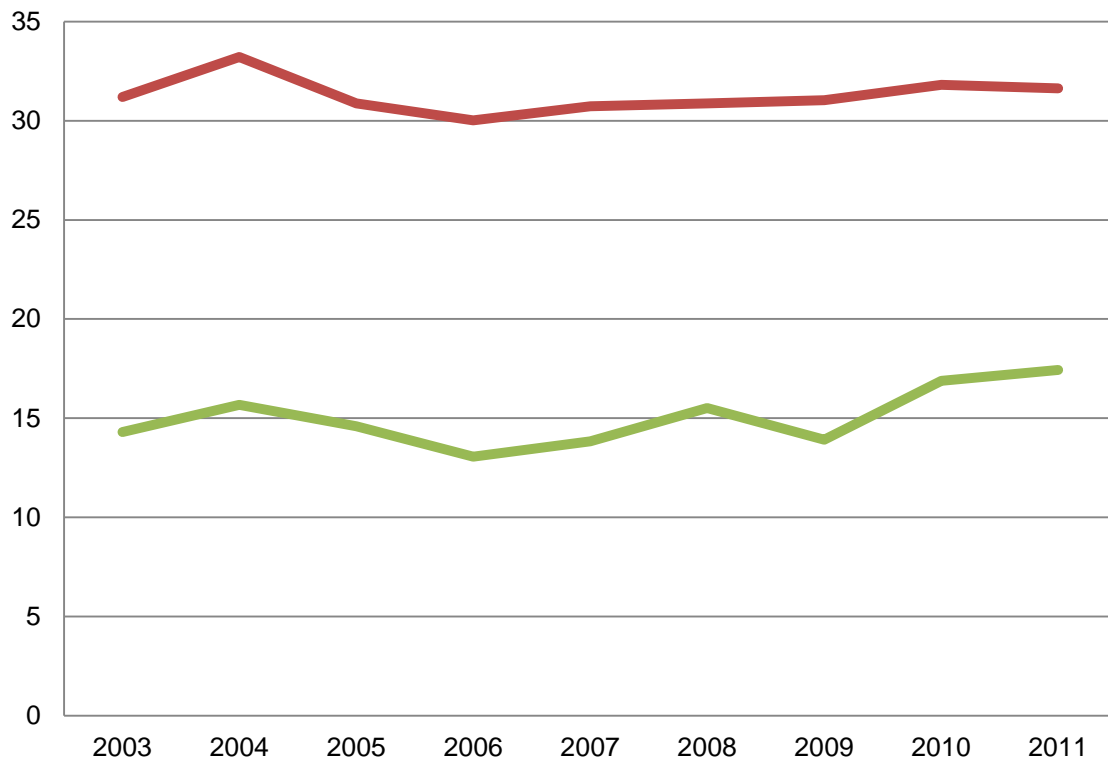


### Using Food Pantry Criteria, What is the US Nonprofit Poverty Rate?

For this paper, data from four selected states is used to illustrate overall patterns of need according to the proposed nonprofit poverty line. Analysis on additional states is continuing, but the initial results from those states are similar.

The first major conclusion found is that if using the nonprofit poverty line, the population that would be considered “needy” is much greater than the percent of the population in poverty according to the federal definition. The population under the nonprofit poverty line is about double, in certain cases sometimes more, than the federal poverty line represents. The federal poverty line vastly underestimates need in the country. Figure 5 presents a comparison of the two lines for North Carolina from 2003 to 2011.

**Figure 5.** Percent of North Carolina Population under Federal (lower) and Nonprofit (upper) Poverty Lines, (2003–11)



*Note:* Lower line represents the federal poverty line; the upper, the nonprofit poverty line.

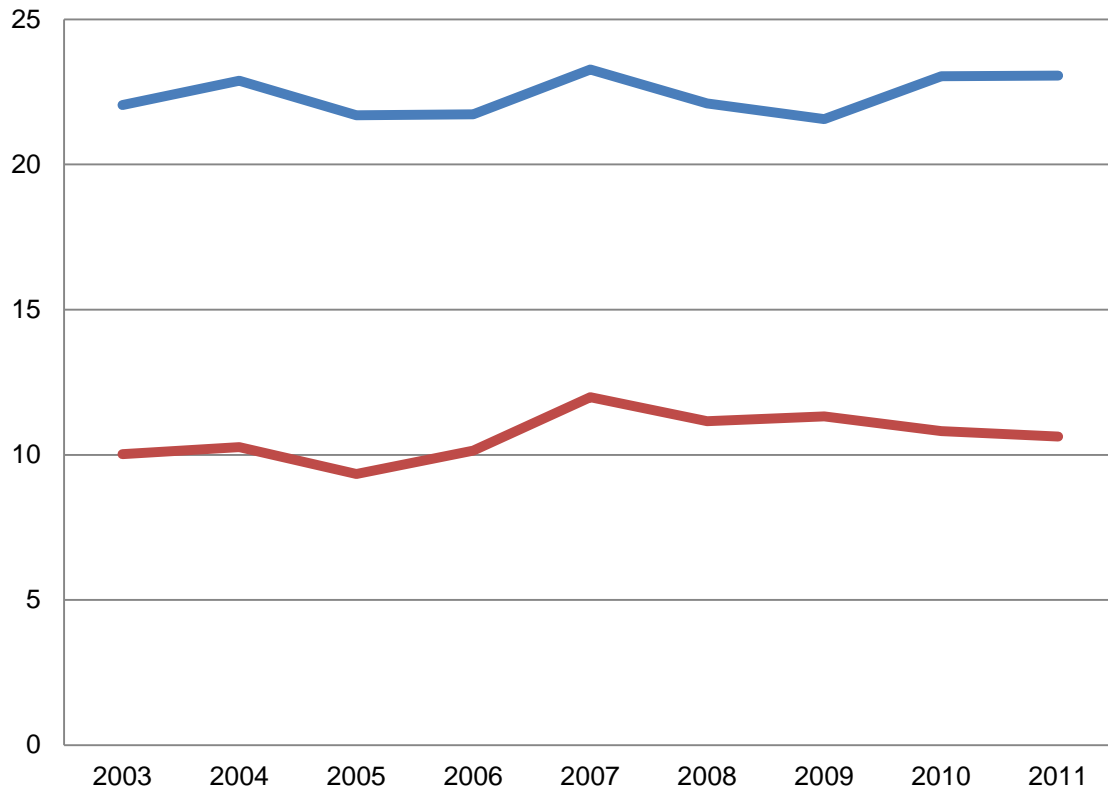
Figure 6 shows the same analysis for the state of Massachusetts. While the two different versions of poverty lines are obviously highly correlated, the trend lines for the state of Massachusetts diverge somewhat in the later years. One interpretation of this is that individuals and families are moving up from being in the poorest of the poor group to a “working poor” status but not moving far enough to move to middle-class status. More likely, some folks are

moving out of official poverty status, moving up, but no one within the working poor group—that is, the group represented between the federal poverty line and the nonprofit property line, is moving up into economic stability—the middle class.

Figure 7 represents the case of Michigan. In this case, both the percent of the population under the federal poverty line and the percent under the nonprofit poverty line have grown. This implies those in the working poor status lost ground as a whole, swelling the ranks of the poorest of the poor. At the same time those who might have been economically stable before are now part of the working poor, and could walk into a church and qualify for food assistance.

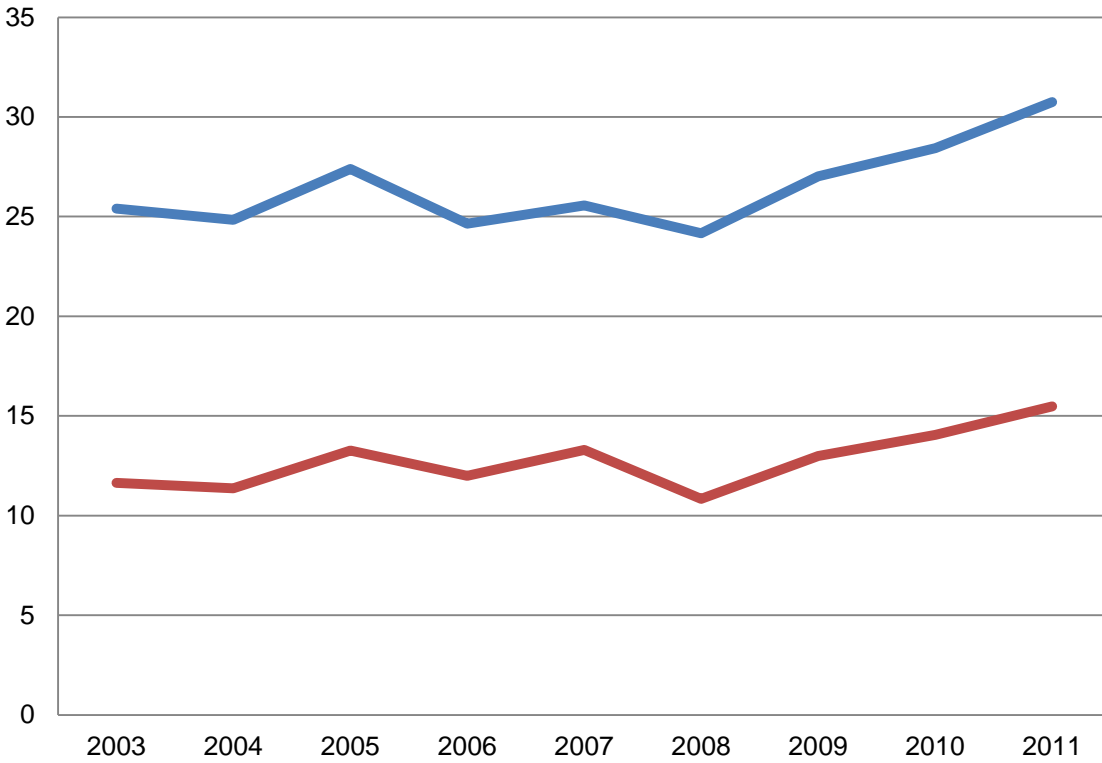
Michigan also shows that the proportion of the population that would be considered needy has grown dramatically in some states over the past decade, now representing close to a third of the population. A significant portion of Michigan's population has lost ground. This story is not new—median incomes have fallen. What this emphasizes is how those who might have been considered economically stable working households have fallen into a needy category.

**Figure 6.** Percent of Massachusetts Population under Federal (lower) and Nonprofit (upper) Poverty Lines, 2003–11



*Note:* Lower line represents the federal poverty line; the upper, the nonprofit poverty line.

Figure 7. Percent of Michigan Population under Federal (lower) and Nonprofit (upper) Poverty Lines, 2003–11



*Note:* Lower line represents the federal poverty line; the upper, the nonprofit poverty line.

One surprising result was the extent of poverty in the larger households. While expected because this is the case in using federal poverty rates, the nonprofit poverty line rates were often above 50 percent. For example, using the nonprofit rate, for Georgia, all nine-member family households were in need, involving 18,104 individuals—the majority of them children. This is an unusual situation, but the distribution data support the point that poverty is a plague with larger households. To illustrate this point, data for Florida in 2011 are presented by household size in table 1.

**Table 1.** Nonprofit Poverty Line Analysis, Florida, 2011

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<b>Family size</b>	<b>Percent of population living under traditional US federal poverty line</b>	<b>Percent of population living under nonprofit line</b>
One person	23	44
Two people	10	23
Three people	13	26
Four people	14	26
Five people	18	34
Six people	27	49
Seven people	39	70
Eight people	43	70
Nine people	16	40

### **Limitations**

As mentioned above, we determined the dollar income level for the nonprofit poverty line independent of the federal poverty line. It is important to note the pantries all work independently and use multiple criteria in determining who may receive free food. Some pantries use an extension of federal poverty guidelines directly. For example, some use the figure of 185 percent of federal poverty lines as a cutoff point, since that is the criteria for the federal food aid program for children run through schools called Free and Reduced Price Lunch. However, in general the eligibility process is much more subjective and individual to the pantry and the local

situation. Interviews suggest that in the end, those criteria result in distribution to those who generally would fall around or below 180 percent of the federal poverty line. Therefore, we use the 180 percent figure merely as a tool to more easily apply this level to the income data used. More detailed documentation on the exact criteria used by these nonprofits is needed.

A second important limitation is that we base our nonprofit line on information from community nonprofits in North Carolina. A criticism of the data presented here is that application of the North Carolina line to other states is prey to cost-of-living differences, the same limitation that impacts the federal poverty line. However, information in prior research by the authors in another state, Iowa, suggests pantries in both regions are consistent with each other, suggesting their approach is not entirely state-specific, or, in fact, regional. More state- or region-specific research with community-level nonprofits would help advance this work, establish more locally valid measures, and test the legitimacy of this approach overall.

## **Conclusion**

In the United States, in general, traditional discussions of poverty have gone out of style. In public policy, poverty is not even discussed, the War on Poverty being abandoned (Rose and Baumgartner 2013). The terms “economic distress” and “economic hardship” have been substituted. This is not a one-to-one exchange, however. Poverty is reserved for the poorest of the poor, but a much larger portion of Americans may experience economic hardship. By way of an example using two main groups of new descriptive data—the use of food pantries in two different regions and the application of nonprofit standards of need—this research suggests that economic hardship is much more widespread in the United States than is evidenced by traditional



measures. The most important conclusion of this work is the need for a different perspective on economic condition in the United States. Other countries are experimenting with efforts to measure material need to understand national economic condition. Tremendous amounts of data exist via our community level non-profits, largely untapped. Researchers should re-discover the value in hands-on research with original data—messy and difficult to obtain, but closer to reflecting reality, perhaps, than relying on massaged and cleansed government series.

The idea of “middle class” implies there is a middle bracketed by a lower and an upper class. When economic hardship impacts a much larger portion of society—a third or close to half of citizens, the middle class starts to disappear. Given that community level nonprofits, for the most part, serve everyone, filling gaps where government does not cover, it is clear they serve as true social safety nets of last resort, keeping people from hunger in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

This example supports what others have already posited: we are a fundamentally different nation in terms of have and have-nots. Yet our public policy structure is based on government programs established for a societal make-up that no longer exists. The question now becomes what to do about it, if anything. At a minimum, if federal government social safety net programs no longer fit the needs of the population, by choice or external constraints, the question for public policy and administration researchers should turn to the ability—the capacity—of local and state governments and the nonprofit sector to step in (Paynter et al. 2011). Research needs to continue to explore better measures of need that incorporate material deprivation and local circumstance. Those data exist and can be used to make better public policy to address the need, but the important role played by and the partnership with the nonprofit sector must be

acknowledged (Paynter 2013). Otherwise, we should accept that as a policy, we tolerate hunger in our society.

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