



THE NEED FOR FOOD: FAMILIES SERVED BY CHILD WELFARE IN ILLINOIS

RESEARCH BRIEF | JESSE J. HELTON, APRIL DIAZ | June 2012

The purpose of this research brief is to examine the use of community food services (such as food pantries or soup kitchens) and state-provided food assistance programs among families involved in child welfare investigations in Illinois. Community food services and government food assistance programs are important strategies in fighting food insecurity for hungry families. Food insecurity is defined as “[not having] access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.”¹ In the United States, approximately 21% of households with children are food insecure.² Examining food insecurity in a child welfare population is warranted given that most families investigated for maltreatment are poor and the most common type of allegation is neglect, which includes being unable to feed children adequately.

One way in which the government attempts to reduce food insecurity is through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food stamps to families based on income and family size. SNAP aids 45 million people in the U.S., including 1.8 million people in Illinois.³ While SNAP is not a cure-all for food insecurity, research indicates that it can be an effective tool in reducing hunger.⁴ Unfortunately, many families with children who are eligible for food stamps do not receive them. Reasons for this include confusion about eligibility, the inconvenience of travel to state health offices, and stigma associated with using food stamps.⁵ As a result, many families remain food insecure and continue to struggle with the stress of poverty and hunger.⁶ This brief will (1) estimate the percentage of households using community food service and food

assistance programs in Illinois among families involved in a substantiated child maltreatment investigation, and (2) determine the percentages of these households that are eligible for food assistance and that participate. Because use of these services may vary depending on the degree of children’s involvement with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), results are analyzed separately for different households: traditional foster care (n=129), kinship foster care (n=169), biological families receiving DCFS intact family services (n=314), and biological families whose case was closed without services following an investigation (n=127).

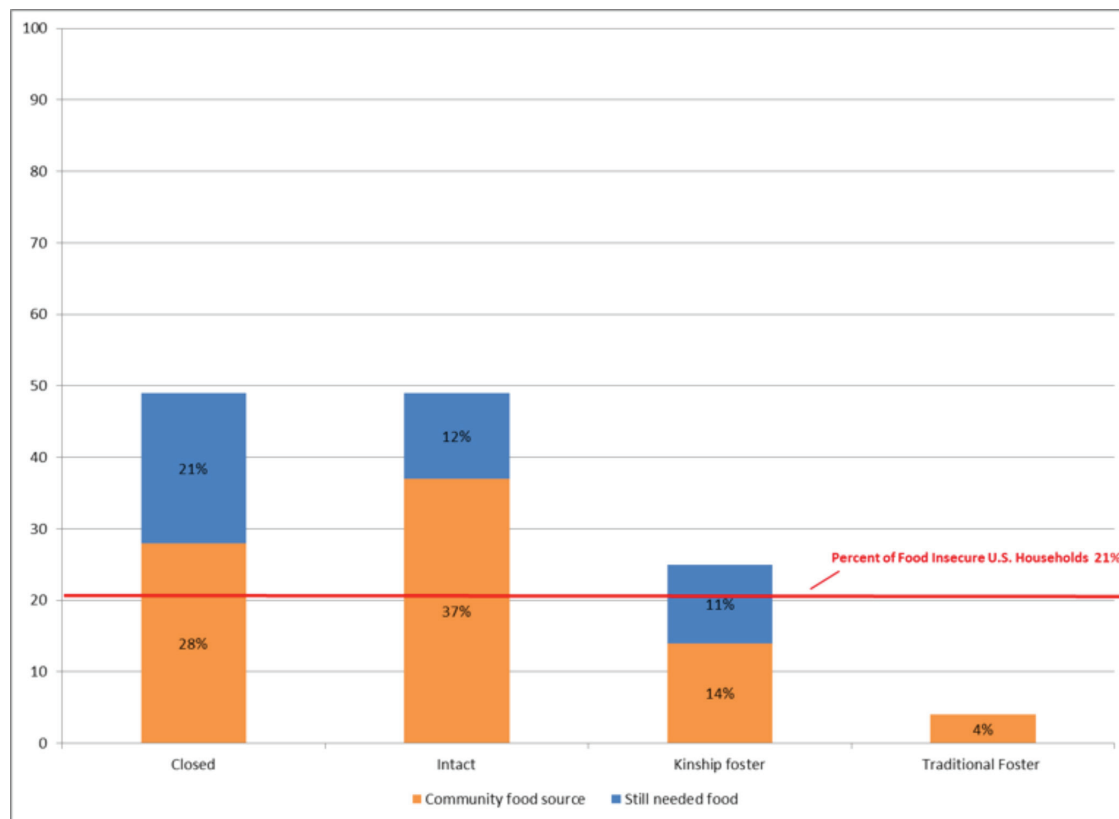
The data are derived from the baseline interview of the Illinois Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (ISCAW), which sampled substantiated maltreatment investigation cases between March of 2008 and January of 2009. Caregivers were asked if they had received food from a community source like a soup kitchen or a food bank in the last year. If caregivers did not report using any community food services, they were then asked if they had needed food in the last year. If a caregiver reported either using a community food service or reported needing food in the past year, they were coded as needing food that they were otherwise unable to provide themselves in the past year. Caregivers were also asked if anyone in the household was currently receiving food stamps. Food stamp eligibility was determined using caregiver-reported total family income and household size, which included all biological children, foster children, and adults “dependent on this income.” An income-to-needs ratio was then calculated



by dividing family income by the federal poverty threshold for the different household sizes. Although eligibility for food assistance is defined as a family having both a “gross income below 130% of the federal poverty level and applicable assets worth less than \$2,000 or \$3,000”,⁷ no information on assets is available in ISCAW. As a proxy, this analysis coded eligibility as families reporting income below 130% of the federal poverty threshold. Only statistically significant differences between placements are reported in this brief.

Need for Food and Use of Community Food Services. Twenty-eight percent of families whose case was closed following a substantiated investigation in Illinois reported using a community food service (such as food pantries or soup kitchens) in the past year, compared to 37% of families receiving intact family services, 14% of kinship foster families, and only 4% of traditional foster families (see Figure 1). Looking at those families who did not report using a community food service, 21% of families whose case was closed reported needing food in the past year, compared to 12% receiving intact family services and 11% of kinship families; no traditional foster families reported needing food in the past year. Almost half (49%) of families whose case was closed as well as 49% of families receiving intact family services needed food they were unable to provide themselves in the past year, compared to 25% of kinship foster families and 4% of traditional foster families. Around 21% of all households with children in the general population were food insecure in 2009.⁸

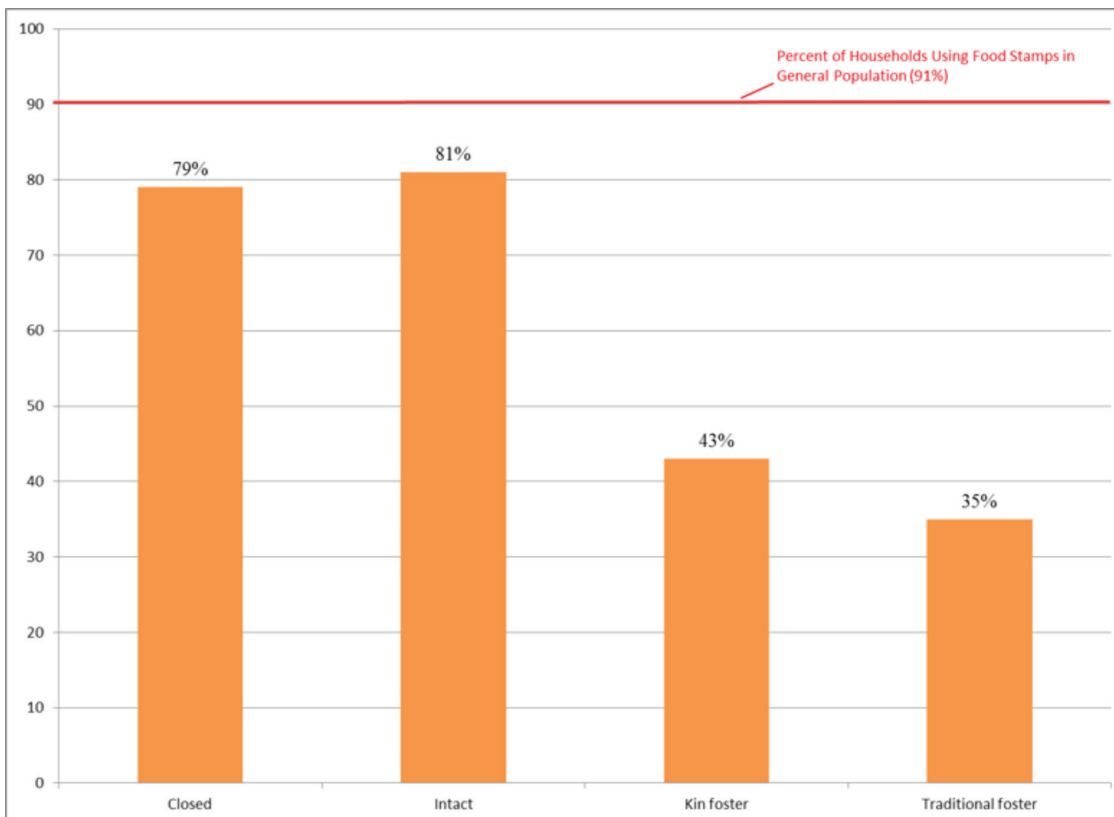
FIGURE I: Percent of Households Needing Food by Placement in Illinois





Eligibility and Use of Food Stamps. Over three-quarters (77%) of families whose case was closed following a substantiated investigation were below 130% of the federal poverty line and therefore eligible for food stamps, compared to 69% of families receiving intact family services, 43% of kinship foster families, and 28% of traditional foster families. In 2010, 24% of households with children in the general population were below 130% of the federal poverty line.⁹ Of eligible families, 79% of families whose case was closed following a substantiated investigation reported using food stamps at time of interview, compared to 81% of families receiving intact family services, 43% of kinship foster families, and 35% of traditional foster families. In 2009, 91% of eligible households with children in the general population used food stamps (see Figure 2).¹⁰ Although differences in placements were not statistically significant, a quarter (25%) of families providing kinship foster care and almost a fifth (19%) of traditional foster families were eligible for food stamps but not receiving them, as were meaningful proportions in closed cases (16%), and in intact family cases (13%).

FIGURE 1: Percent of Households Below 130% of Federal Poverty Line using Food Stamps by Placement





Summary

- When families were involved in substantiated child maltreatment investigations and children remained in the home, 49% of families needed food in the past year (whether their DCFS case was closed or they received intact family services). Families caring for children placed outside of the home following a substantiated maltreatment investigation were much less likely to have needed food in the past year: 25% of kinship foster families and only 4% of traditional foster families.
- A sizable number of families involved with child welfare in Illinois were below 130% of the federal poverty line, and very likely eligible for food assistance: 77% of families whose case was closed, 69% of families receiving intact family services, 43% of kinship foster families, and 28% of traditional foster families.
- The percentage of food stamp eligible families (those with total incomes below 130% of the federal poverty line) involved with child welfare in Illinois currently using food stamps varied by placement: 79% of families whose case was closed, 81% of families receiving intact family services, 43% of kinship foster families, and 35% of traditional foster families. A quarter of kinship foster families and almost a fifth of traditional foster families were eligible for food stamps but not using them, as were meaningful proportions of families in closed and intact family cases.

Conclusion

Illinois children staying with biological parents following a substantiated investigation are the most at risk for needing food, while kinship families were a little higher than the national average and traditional foster families were at very low risk. Unexpected proportions of caregivers in traditional and kinship foster care families were eligible for food stamps but not using them, raising questions even among these families about food insecurity and the strains of providing food. Food insecurity can have lasting detrimental effects on child physical health, cognitive development, and emotional functioning. Therefore every effort must be made to support household enrollment in SNAP for all eligible caregivers caring for a child involved in a substantiated maltreatment investigation, as well as enrollment related free or reduced-cost food assistance programs such as Woman Infants and Children (WIC) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).



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⁸ Ratcliffe, C., McKernan, S., & Zhang, S. (2011). How much does the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program reduce food insecurity? *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 93(4), 1082-1098.

⁹ United States Census. (2010). Families With Related Children Under 18 by Number of Working Family Members and Family Structure. http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032011/pov/new07_130_01.htm

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