

# Within Month Variability in Use of Soup Kitchens in New York State

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**Abstract:** This paper describes the variation in use of soup kitchens throughout the month using data from the New York State Nutritional Surveillance Program. Excluding November, December, and May, when holiday meals created a different pattern of use, number of meals served in soup kitchens generally increased toward the end of the month, averaging 43 per cent higher for Upstate and 14 per cent higher for New York City in the last week as compared

to the first week of the month. The overall increase throughout the month and difference in the magnitude of increase between Upstate and New York City corresponds to the timing of income maintenance benefits distribution. Distribution of most public assistance benefits occurs at the beginning of each month in Upstate, whereas it is staggered in New York City throughout the month. (*Am J Public Health* 1988; 78:1298-1301.)

## Introduction

The issue of hunger in the United States is hotly debated,<sup>1-3</sup> with controversy focusing on the definition of hunger; its location, causes, prevalence, and whether it is increasing.<sup>4-7</sup> Groups throughout the nation have reported an increased number of emergency food relief (EFR) sites<sup>8</sup> and increased use of existing EFR services.<sup>9-15</sup> Private food banks serving EFR programs have reported increased demand from EFR sites for food.<sup>9,16</sup>

Some reports indicate that EFR operators experience increased demand for their services at the end of the month.<sup>12,17</sup> Other studies link use of EFR to inadequate public assistance and food stamp benefits.<sup>12,18-20</sup> Although these reports are suggestive, little is definitively known about patterns of EFR usage, characteristics of the individuals using EFR, or specific reasons for such use.

In this paper we present quantitative data on the number of meals served in soup kitchens throughout New York State (NYS) over a 12-month period. We describe patterns of soup kitchens use throughout the month in areas with different public assistance distribution schedules.

## Methods

Since 1984, the New York State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has assisted groups that are at high risk of food insufficiency to obtain necessary food. The groups targeted by the program are the frail elderly, low income women and children, and the homeless and destitute. In order to monitor these groups, SNAP supports the New York State Nutrition Surveillance Project, which operates from the NYS Department of Health's Bureau of Nutrition with the technical assistance of the Cornell University Division of Nutritional Sciences.

A census of all existing EFR programs in the state was conducted between November 1, 1984 and February 28, 1985.<sup>21</sup> Programs included in the census were food pantries,

which provided dry or canned food or vouchers for food, and soup kitchens, which served meals on site. One hundred and ninety-two soup kitchens were identified.<sup>22</sup>

From this census, a sample of soup kitchens was randomly selected, stratified by the six NYS public health regions and the number of meals each site served monthly. Upstate New York consists of Public Health Regions I through V; New York City (Region VI) consists of the Boroughs of Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens. Of the 115 soup kitchen sites selected to participate in the monitoring system, 94 (82 per cent) provided data. Seven (6 per cent) had stopped operating since the census, and 14 (12 per cent) declined to participate in ongoing monitoring.

The contact person for each participating soup kitchen reported the number of meals served at each meal period of each day in each month. We present data for July 1985 through June 1986.

In order to examine weekly variability in soup kitchen use within a month, we calculated the mean number of meals served each week for the sample sites. Week 1 was defined as the first seven calendar days in the month, week 2 as the second seven calendar days in the month, and so on for each month. If the first calendar day of the month was Sunday, the first week was defined as calendar days 2 - 8, the second week as calendar days 9 - 15, and so on. Day 1 of that month was included in the fourth week of the previous month. If there were more than seven days included in the fourth week, it was standardized to a seven-day week by multiplication of the weekly total times 7/n, where n was the number of actual days in that week.

The mean number of meals served weekly for each site was averaged across all participating sample sites for strata defined by area of the state (Upstate or New York City) and by size of soup kitchen. Three sizes of soup kitchens were defined in Upstate New York, categorized by the 50th and 75th percentile values of number of meals served monthly for all Upstate sample sites. Only two sizes of soup kitchens in New York City were defined (above and below the 75th percentile) because there was very little difference in number of meals served between sites in the lower 50th percentile and those between the 50th and 75th percentiles.

For each region and month, a paired-t test for the difference between two means was performed to test whether the mean number of meals served in the fourth week differed from the mean number of meals served during the first week

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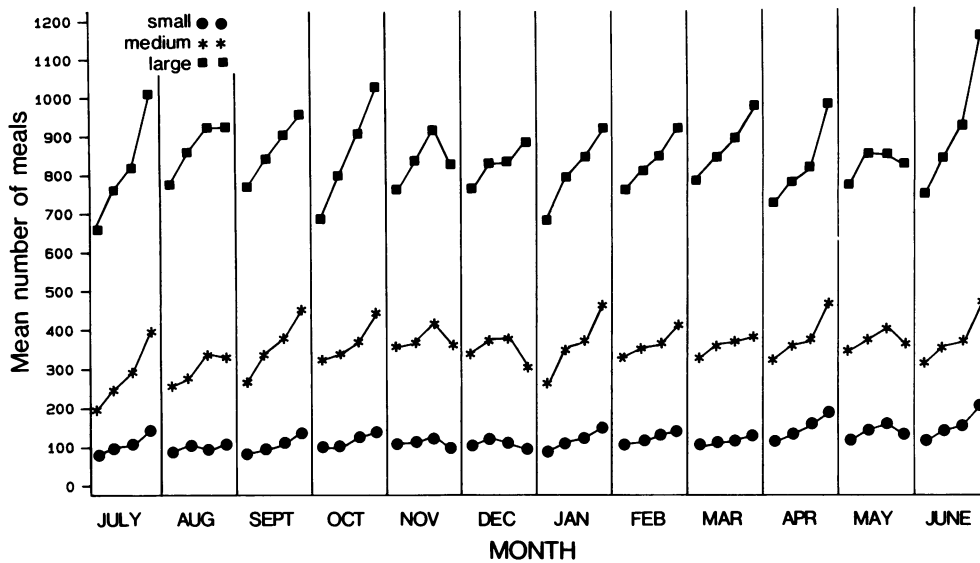


FIGURE 1—Mean Number of Meals Served Weekly in Soup Kitchens by Size of Kitchen (see key inset), July 1985-June 1986, Upstate New York

of that month. Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals for the mean differences were computed.<sup>23</sup>

Distribution schedules for the various public welfare programs and monthly food stamp caseloads by county were obtained from the New York State Department of Social Services and from the New York City Human Resources Administration.<sup>24</sup>

### Results

Fifty-five per cent of the soup kitchens in the state were located in New York City.<sup>22</sup> From July 1985 through June 1986, the number of meals served each month in soup kitchens averaged about 528,000 in New York City and 123,000 in Upstate New York. In each area, there was no difference across months in the total number of meals served as assessed by 95 per cent confidence intervals.

The mean number of meals served per week in the sample soup kitchens by size of soup kitchen is depicted for Upstate New York (Figure 1) and New York City (Figure 2). A pattern of increased number of meals served with each successive week throughout the month predominated in Upstate New York and, to a lesser extent, in New York City. Months with holidays in the latter weeks, such as November, December, and May, tended to experience peak use during the third week with lower use during the fourth week. This pattern of use might be due to the rescheduling of special holiday meals and the closing of soup kitchens on holidays.

These patterns were much stronger for Upstate New York than for New York City (Table 1). Excluding November, December, and May, the number of meals served in soup kitchens during Week 4 as compared to Week 1 averaged 43 per cent higher for Upstate and 14 per cent higher for New York City.

The difference in weekly use of soup kitchens between Upstate and New York City is consistent with geographic differences in the distribution schedules of public assistance (Table 2). In Upstate New York, public assistance is distributed in the first and third weeks, and food stamps are

distributed primarily in the first week. In New York City, public assistance is distributed throughout the month with approximately equal numbers of recipients receiving checks each week, and food stamps are distributed during the first two weeks.<sup>24</sup> Thus, a family receiving public assistance in Upstate New York who uses EFR may be more likely to do so at the end of the month, whereas the same family in New York City is more likely to use EFR at any time of the month, depending on that family's distribution of benefits schedule.

### Discussion

EFR users can be divided into those who do not participate in existing public income and food assistance programs and those who do so. Many studies have found that about half of EFR users also receive public income assistance.<sup>12,13,19,25</sup>

The high proportion of EFR users receiving public assistance suggests that, for some, the package of benefits provided may be insufficient to meet basic needs. In most states, benefits provided by various programs have not kept up with inflation.<sup>26</sup> Between 1970 and 1985, the average AFDC (aid for dependent children) benefit fell 33 per cent in constant dollar terms.<sup>27</sup> In New York State, where the average AFDC individual benefit is eighth highest in the nation,<sup>28</sup> the maximum benefit package brings a household to 83.7 per cent of poverty.<sup>29</sup>

Other evidence comes from studies of food stamp recipients. In one such study of 76 Cleveland, Ohio AFDC families using food stamps, an average of 94 per cent of food stamps was spent during the first two weeks of the month.<sup>30</sup> Since stamps can be used at any time of the month, "running out" of stamps does not necessarily indicate lack of money to buy food.<sup>16</sup> However, 11 per cent of the families used emergency foods or meals at soup kitchens during the first two weeks of the month, whereas 41 per cent of the families used these resources during the last two weeks of the month.<sup>30</sup>

Another line of evidence is provided by studies describing the reasons for using EFR, reported by sites or by clients

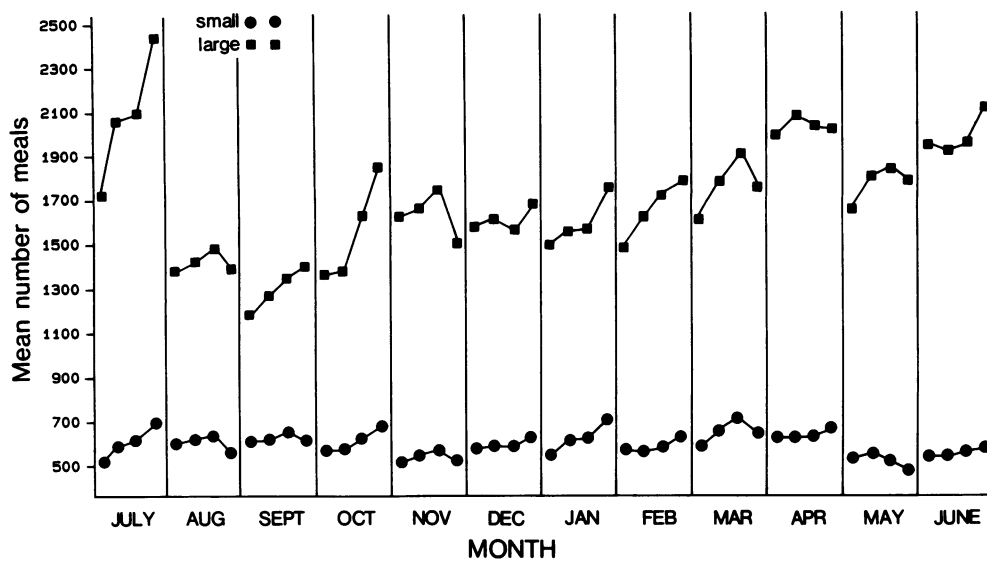


FIGURE 2—Mean Number of Meals Served Weekly in Soup Kitchens by Size of Kitchen (see key inset), July 1985-June 1986, New York City

themselves. Some studies have reported that clients use EFR when money or food stamps run out.<sup>12,17-20,31</sup> Some have reported increased use of EFR at the end of the month,<sup>12,17,32</sup> because of this depletion of government assistance.<sup>13,33</sup>

The pattern of increased demand for food at the end of the month may be even more pronounced in food pantries. Results from a survey of food pantry and soup kitchen operators which accompanied the 1984-85 census of New York State emergency food relief sites support this hypothesis. While 52 per cent of soup kitchen operators reported increased demand for food at the end of the month or when checks ran out, 60 per cent of food pantry operators reported this pattern.<sup>22</sup> This difference may be due to a different composition of clients. Soup kitchens are more likely than food pantries to serve the homeless, many of whom are single adults.<sup>25</sup> Food pantries are more likely than soup kitchens to serve families; 94 per cent of New York State food pantries reported a majority of users as families, compared with 41

per cent of soup kitchens in the state.<sup>22</sup> Families are more likely than single adults to receive need-based government assistance, since participation in AFDC, the major cash assistance program, is limited to families. In the New York City study, 62 per cent of food pantry clients received conventional benefits as contrasted to 46 per cent of soup kitchen clients.<sup>25</sup>

Our findings add to previous work in two important ways. First, quantitative data were obtained from a scientifically drawn sample of soup kitchens in New York State. A distinct pattern of increasing use of soup kitchens with each successive week throughout the month was found in both Upstate New York and New York City. Second, New York State provided a natural experiment to shed light on the hypothesized relationship between cyclical patterns of EFR use and public assistance benefits. The cyclical pattern of soup kitchen use is much stronger in Upstate than in New York City—a difference which corresponds to the timing of

TABLE 1—Mean Number of Meals Served at Soup Kitchens in Week 1 and Week 4 for New York City and Upstate New York by Month

Months	Upstate New York			New York City		
	Mean # of Meals		Difference (95% CI)	Mean # of Meals		Difference (95% CI)
	Week 1	Week 4		Week 1	Week 4	
July	311	525	214 (106,323)	727	1012	285 (95, 474)
August	373	460	88 (30, 145)	755	728	-27 (-79, 25)
September	372	526	154 (78, 230)	792	784	-8 (-204,188)
October	377	548	171 (95, 248)	804	1031	227 (105, 349)
November	415	434	19 (-39, 78)	810	782	-27 (-124, 69)
December	808	1018	210 (-14, 74)	849	869	20 (-135,174)
January	343	525	182 (119,245)	808	1018	210 (113, 306)
February	401	501	100 (62, 138)	820	946	126 (44, 209)
March	399	497	98 (43, 152)	870	933	64 (-36, 164)
April	341	490	149 (92, 206)	1004	1040	36 (-93, 165)
May	355	384	29 (-10, 69)	921	861	-60 (-215, 96)
June	338	538	200 (129,271)	935	1031	96 (21, 171)

**TABLE 2—Income Support Program Distribution Schedule for Upstate New York and New York City**

Area	Date of the Month Issued			
	1-7	8-15	16-23	24-31
Upstate New York				
Food Stamps <sup>a</sup>	X	(X)	(X)	(X)
Public Assistance <sup>b</sup>	X		X	
Social Security	X			
SSI	X			
Veteran's Benefits	X			
Unemployment <sup>c</sup>	X	X	X	X
New York City				
Food Stamps <sup>d</sup>	X	X		
Public Assistance <sup>e</sup>	X	X		X
Social Security	X			
SSI	X			
Veteran's Benefits	X			
Unemployment <sup>c</sup>	X	X	X	X

SSI = Supplemental Security Income

a) Upstate New York counties have slightly differing distribution schedules for food stamps. We estimate that 86 per cent of food stamp recipients receive their benefits during Week 1, 11 per cent during Week 2, 3 per cent during Week 3, and less than 1 per cent during Week 4.

b) Individuals in upstate New York generally receive public assistance benefits twice a month, approximately two weeks apart.

c) Individuals receive 26 payments, either weekly or biweekly.

d) Individuals receive food stamp benefits once a month. In New York City, distribution is staggered equally during the first two weeks of the month.

e) Individuals receive public assistance benefits twice a month, approximately two weeks apart. In New York City, distribution is staggered to different clients throughout the month.

public assistance distribution. More research is needed to pinpoint the nature and prevalence of specific reasons for dependence on EFR, so as to inform discussion about the appropriate roles of the public and private sector in providing food assistance.

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