



# The Hands that Feed:

## A portrait of hunger in North Carolina

In 2009, UNC professor Maureen Berner, East Carolina political scientist Sharon Paynter, and photojournalist Donn Young documented the work of nonprofits and volunteers who help feed the working poor. Their work shows a side of the story few have seen.

by Mark Derewicz  
photographs by Donn Young

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**Left:** Harry Jones of Orange County, North Carolina, gathers crops at McAdams Farm to take to the Orange Congregation in Mission in Hillsborough. He does this every week, at his own expense, despite battling leukemia for the past ten years and undergoing several brain operations. He says he is doing everything he can to make sure no crops rot in the fields or on farmers' stands as long as there are people who desperately need food.

**Above right:** Every Tuesday morning Brenda Johnson travels an hour from Dunn, North Carolina, to the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina in Raleigh to buy food. Her nonprofit pantry, Recruiters for Christ, is open every Wednesday. Food bank perishable-food assistant Michael Night forklifts a palette of food from the warehouse floor onto Johnson's truck. Johnson's church also donates money to the food bank to make sure her congregation helps others in need who do not live in Dunn.



**Tuesday, 8:30 a.m. Brenda Johnson walks** the aisles of Raleigh's food-bank warehouse, peering up at boxes stacked twenty feet high. She searches for rice, canned goods, produce—any staple she can give to those in need in her hometown of Dunn, North Carolina. She tells her volunteers what she wants. They jot down a list of items and hand it to the food-bank attendant, who then forklifts 6,600 pounds of food into Johnson's big, yellow truck.

Back at the church where she ministers, Johnson helps ten congregants pack grocery bags full of food and then helps deliver the bags to hundreds of people. She does this every week, just like thousands of other North Carolinians who lead soup kitchens, pantries, senior centers, day cares, and shelters—independent nonprofits that operate on small budgets and get little or no government support. No umbrella organization oversees their work. Yet hundreds of thousands of people across the state depend on people like Johnson for the most basic necessity of life.

In fact, according to the national nonprofit Feeding America, 12.6 percent of all North Carolinians experience something called food insecurity, which means that they don't have reliable access to food.



Brenda Johnson and her aunt LiNelle McKoy with the old cast-iron pot they once hauled around Dunn to collect and wash crops before giving them to the poor. Johnson is the minister of a nondenominational church of about sixty congregants, many of whom help package food for the poor. Other churches help her deliver food to shut-ins.

**What happens when a volunteer like Brenda Johnson, who has devoted her entire life to aiding the poor, can no longer lug bags of groceries around Dunn? “I question the capacity of these nonprofit pantries to keep this up,” Maureen Berner says.**

“That’s an incredible number,” says Maureen Berner, a professor in UNC’s School of Government who researches poverty and hunger trends. That’s more than a million people who might know how they’ll put food on the table tonight or tomorrow but not at the end of the week or month.

When Berner and Sharon Paynter first teamed up to study food insecurity, they had two main questions: Who are the people who seek food from pantries? And for how long do they need help? But the answers to these questions raised new, larger ones. If hundreds of thousands of people depend on volunteers like Johnson for food, is the government abandoning its traditional responsibility of helping those in need through welfare programs such as food stamps? And is that a bad thing?

For several decades, thousands of dedicated volunteers have operated North Carolina’s food pantries and soup kitchens as part of church charities or independent nonprofits, Berner says. They get their food from different sources, but most of it comes from one of six food banks, also nonprofit. These food banks get nearly all of their products from supermarket chains, food companies, individual donors, and local farms. The state and federal government provide some funding.

There are nearly five hundred pantries in the thirty-four counties served by the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. Most are run by faith-based groups of volunteers. Berner

says she's amazed at the amount of work the volunteers put in, but if donations to food banks and pantries decrease, the volunteers will have to work that much harder to find alternate means to feed the poor. And if they can't, then food insecurity could turn into hunger and malnutrition.

"I question the capacity of these nonprofit pantries to keep this up," Berner says. What happens when a volunteer such as Brenda Johnson, who has devoted her entire life to aiding the poor, can no longer lug bags of groceries around Dunn? "Whenever I ask that kind of question someone at the church always tells me that another person will fill her shoes. They say that for hundreds of years churches have been doing this kind of work; they're closest to the people and care the most."

But if nonprofits start struggling, or if demand skyrockets, will the government sustain them? Right now, state and federal governments provide small amounts of funding for food banks. More and more people are relying on pantries stocked by those banks, and most of the pantries are getting larger. In the 1980s, Johnson's pantry was housed in a backyard shed. Today it's in a 2,100-square-foot building. And Johnson plans to grow her operation even more.

As demand increased, the Second Harvest Food Bank in Winston-Salem watched its food supply plummet from 810,000 pounds of food on June 30, 2009, to 500 pounds three weeks later. Once news of the crisis broke, individuals and supermarkets came to the rescue with donations and food drives. Berner says that it's easy to think that the current recession and high unemployment caused this crisis. But she points out that increased demand is a symptom of deeper problems, one of which dates back fourteen years—to August 22, 1996.

## When President Bill Clinton

signed welfare-reform legislation into law, his goal was to make sure that people couldn't abuse the system by staying on welfare their entire lives. He wanted people to get jobs, so he made welfare time-bound.

Four years later, when grad student Kelley O'Brien interned at the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina in Raleigh, she noticed that more and more people were

coming through the doors. She and Berner decided to study how pantries were using the food bank before and after the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. They found that as the government's role in providing food stamps decreased, pantries started providing much more food to their clients. In fact, people sought help from food pantries instead of the government even when they *did* qualify for food stamps.

"Welfare reform wasn't food-stamp reform," Berner points out. "But a lot of people were scared away from the program. They thought they couldn't get food stamps anymore or they thought they wouldn't qualify."

Between 1995 and 2000, the 193 food pantries that Berner studied bought about 100,000 more pounds of food from food banks than they had in the five years before welfare reform. Then, in 2000, use of food stamps began to climb again. Welfare laws hadn't changed, but other things had: there was more outreach into poorer communities, and people were allowed to stay on food stamps longer. Also, Berner says, the stigma associated with using food stamps waned. Meanwhile, more and more people kept seeking help from pantries.

In 2003, Berner's father grew ill and she moved to Iowa to be closer to him. She taught at the University of Northern Iowa for two years and continued her research at the largest food pantry in the northeastern part of the state. Berner found that people who had jobs did not get off food assistance faster. "In fact, it was slightly more likely that people needed long-term assistance from a food pantry if they *did* work," she says. "It seems counterintuitive, I know."

But there's logic to it. When people are working, Berner says, they have a lot of expenses, such as car payments and day care.

**Top:** At Recruiters for Christ, a food pantry in Dunn, Nora Hernandez of Newton Grove and her daughter Yurdia Lopez wait in line with about thirty others to receive food on a Wednesday morning during the summer of 2009.

**Middle:** Abigail Ortiz of Newton Grove is one of several thousand people who received a bag of food from Brenda Johnson's pantry in 2009.

**Bottom:** Volunteers at the Ayden Christian Care Center in Ayden, North Carolina, pack bags of food for clients who came to the center, as well as for people incapable of making the trip.





They pay for these expenses with the idea that income will allow them to make ends meet or eventually get a better-paying job. “But the people going to food pantries often stay stuck in low-wage jobs,” Berner says. “They’re stuck in that low standard of living.” And if they stay at those low-paying jobs long enough, eventually the rising costs of living will catch up with them and they’ll have to sacrifice something—buying groceries, for instance.

In 2005, Berner returned to UNC and has been studying poverty and hunger trends here ever since. She teamed with Paynter at East Carolina University to analyze several hundred random client files from forty pantries in central North Carolina. Here’s what they found:

- Most clients returned to pantries consistently for more than one year.
- The average client returned to pantries for five consecutive years.
- 24 percent of clients were married with no children.
- 15 percent were elderly and single.
- 42 percent were married with kids.
- Many pantry clients, but not a majority, received food stamps.
- In 2007 the median income of clients was 29 percent lower than that of other North Carolinians.
- Only 7.8 percent of clients were living below the federal poverty line.

Berner and Paynter also found that most pantries are helping more people.

“At one pantry, our grad student Emily Anderson pulled out a drawer full of client files for 2008,” Berner says. “Right next to it was another cabinet that was also full, and those files were from just the first two months of 2009.”



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**Top:** Justino, a migrant worker, holds a Bible, which he says he keeps close to him at all times. He travels an hour and a half to the Catholic Parish Outreach pantry in Raleigh when he can’t find enough work.

**Middle:** Terry Raiter volunteers at the Catholic Parish Outreach.

**Bottom:** Joyce Edwards at her home in Ashton Spring Apartments, an independent living center for seniors in Ayden. She goes to the Ayden Christian Care Center once a month for food. Here, she laughs during a conversation with a personal-care assistant who helps Edwards complete daily tasks.

**From 1997 to 2005,** food-pantry demand increased steadily, Berner says. In 2009 demand on the Second Harvest food bank in Winston-Salem rose 76 percent; throughout the rest of North Carolina, demand on food banks increased 30 to 70 percent.

These numbers made Berner and Paynter wonder about the supply side of the equation, so they started studying where pantry operators such as Brenda Johnson get their food. In conversations with food bank and pantry operators, they learned that pantries used to be stocked with about 80 percent canned goods or prepackaged, processed food. “The other 20 percent was local farm produce,” Berner says. Today food banks and pantries probably get more produce than they do prepackaged food.

The trend toward produce is a precarious one. A lot of crops still rot in the fields. And even if every field were picked clean, many shelters, soup kitchens, and pantries would still lack the capacity to store the vegetables; they’d need refrigerators and freezers. Berner and Paynter say that many pantries do have refrigerators, but not enough to deal with the kinds and amounts of food that pantries now receive.

Paynter used to work at a nonprofit that operated one such pantry. One day, two hunters drove up and asked her whether she wanted a deer that they had killed. Paynter didn’t know what to say. She lacked the freezer space to keep the meat and a place for the hunters to butcher the carcass. She wondered about health regulations and if clients would even want venison. But protein-rich foods—whether canned tuna, peanut butter, or red meat—are like gold to pantry operators. The hunters wound up butchering the deer in the parking lot, and they also cleaned the cuts of meat. Paynter then gave the venison to some clients, who were grateful.

For Paynter and Berner, the scene highlighted a growing problem: the hardest donations to deal with are the foods that are freshest and most healthful.

This is one reason why the food bank in Raleigh used a portion of its 2009 financial donations to buy ninety freezers and refrigerators for member agencies. Still, there are thousands of charities that are underfunded and undersupplied. Some operate out of tobacco barns, and many more out of church



John Freeman unpacks bags of groceries from the Recruiters for Christ pantry in October 2009 as his wife Eunice sneaks a cookie. John is retired and the couple's only source of income is Social Security. They live in a two-bedroom ranch house near Dunn.

basements. They do what they can—often quite a lot—but statewide it's not nearly enough.

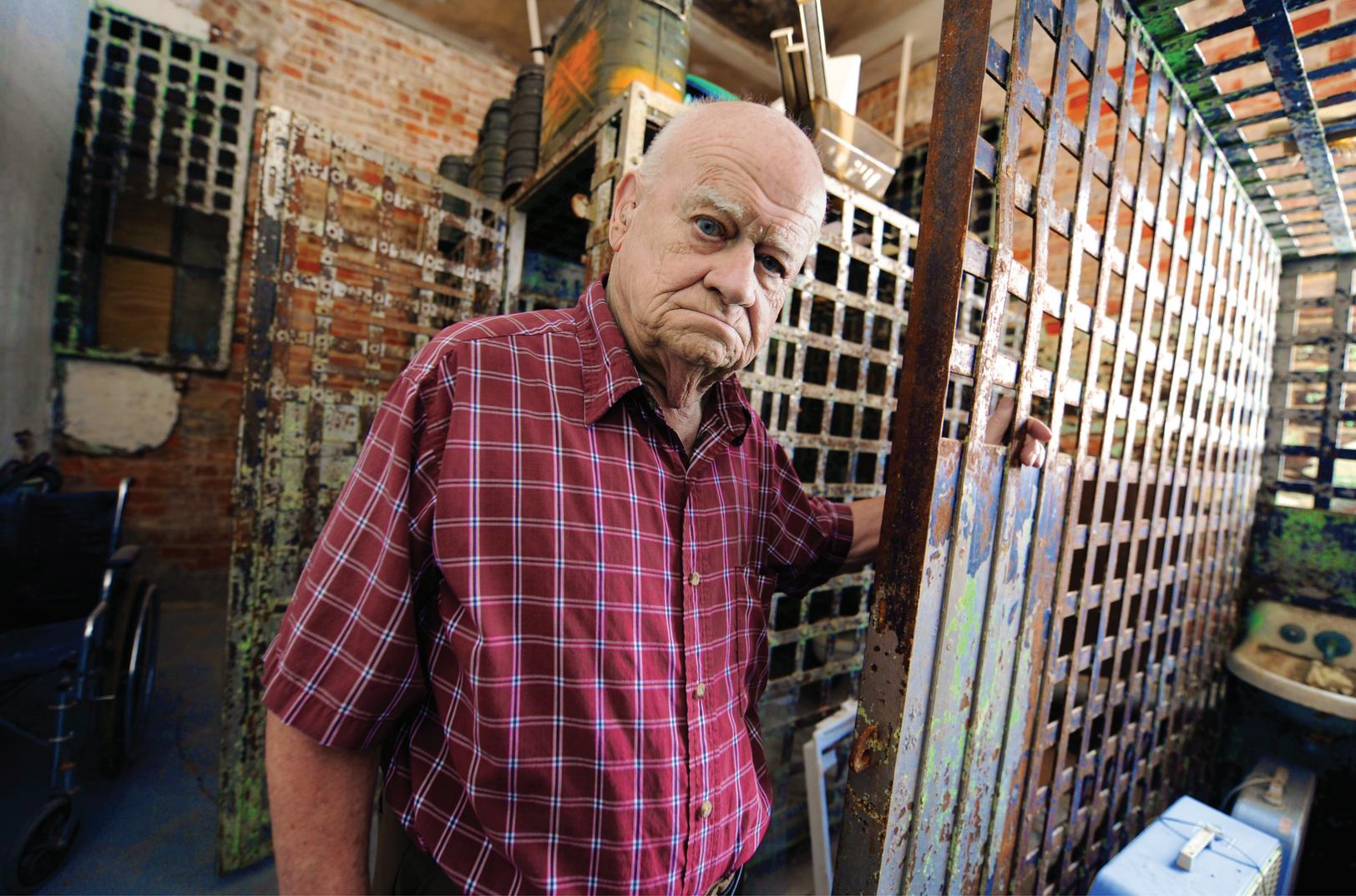
Berner also points out that while eating vegetables is much more healthful, preparing them isn't always easy. "You have to know what to do with ten pounds of sweet potatoes, for instance," she says.

**Berner and Paynter have presented** their findings at conferences across the country, sharing statistics and stories. They show that food insecurity is a better indicator of poverty than traditional barometers such as annual incomes or the unemployment rate, which don't capture whether people can maintain their households or put food on the table.

"The people who go to pantries are not homeless, and most have jobs," Berner says. "They are the working poor."

Berner and Paynter had a hard time connecting the statistics with real people's stories until they met Donn Young. A photojournalist from Louisiana, he'd moved to Chapel Hill after documenting the destruction of Hurricane Katrina as the official photographer for the Port of New Orleans. Young wants to help create image libraries for university researchers, especially those working on human rights issues. He contacted Heather Hunt, assistant director of UNC's poverty center, and she introduced him

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Cliff Stang, the past director of the Ayden Christian Care Center, stands in an old jailhouse that has served as the center's food pantry for many years. Stang still volunteers at the pantry every week.

After Hurricane Floyd flooded eastern North Carolina in 1999, the Raleigh food bank established temporary food assistance agencies down east. "Those agencies never closed," Berner says. "Demand there has never been close to being met."

to Berner and Paynter. Young immediately saw the story lines in Berner's research.

"I wanted to document the entire distribution network," Young says. "This thread that starts with the farms and grocery stores, connects with the food banks and the pantry workers, and then finally with the people who need food. Maureen and Sharon saw the value in this right away."

So did the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, which in May 2010 will feature Berner, Paynter, and Young's work in photo displays and a presentation for the North Carolina General Assembly. The office will also house the photo essays and research at its Raleigh library.

"I was thrilled that I had five thousand lines of data, but I had trouble visualizing it like a story the way Donn could," Berner says. "He's really spurred me to think beyond the data sets. I tell Donn that the food pantries are giving people vegetables more now than ever before, and then he wonders where this produce comes from. So he goes to the farms to document the farmers' lives and the volunteers gleaning the fields. He tells their stories. And then I can go back and research what happens at these farms, how much of their crops go to pantries. This is engaged research. It's about people."

At McAdams Farm in Efland, Young met Harry Jones, who volunteers with the Orange Congregations in Mission pantry.

“Harry’s had eight brain surgeries,” Young says. “He’s got leukemia. And yet he gets up every morning, fills up his truck with gas at his own expense, and takes whatever’s left over in the fields to food pantries.”

“*This* is the stuff my research can’t capture,” Berner says. “This man’s dedication is typical of the whole network of pantries.”

Most of the people who run pantries are white, older, and part of a Christian charity, Berner says. For many of them, feeding the poor is their calling. Brenda Johnson was twenty-eight when she and her aunt started a mission called Recruiters for Christ. With a large, cast-iron washtub in hand, they’d pick crops that were about to rot in neighborhood gardens and on local farms. They’d gather fallen fruit from under trees. Then they’d wash and package the crops and take them to neighbors in need.

“We had this car with a door that would fly open when we’d turn a corner,” Johnson laughs. “There was a hole in the floor and the tires were bald. But we never had a problem. It only got a flat when my husband drove it.”

### Thirty years later, Johnson’s

mission now includes a nondenominational church with about sixty members. Many of them help her buy tons of food from the food bank in Raleigh. The church also

donates two hundred dollars each month to the food bank. “This way, we not only help people in Dunn but help others who need it, too,” Johnson says. “That’s a great blessing. To be able to do this work is a blessing.”

Berner and Paynter don’t doubt that others would step up if such a dedicated woman were no longer able to make her rounds. But Berner says that charities, no matter how well-organized, have never been able to keep up with food demand. Hundreds of pantries have popped up in the past two de-

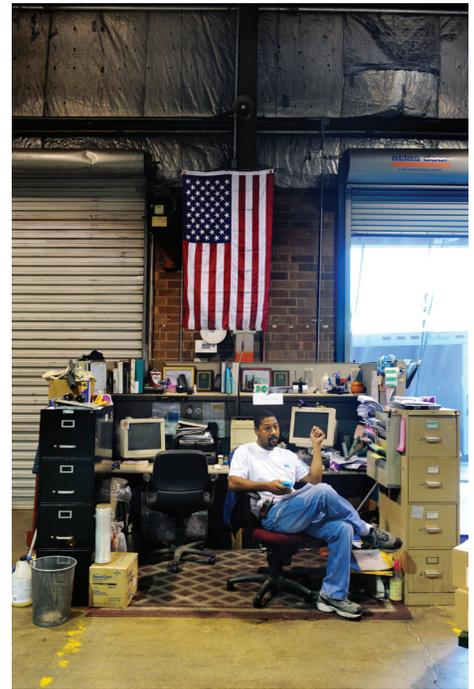
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**Below left:** Betty Deems, 80, runs the Ministries of the Bread of Life, a charity in Farmville. The pantry has been in an old tobacco shed for nearly twenty years. This year, it’s being remodeled: it will now have insulation. Deems delivers food to twenty-six homebound senior citizens and to the local senior center, which relies heavily on donated food.

**Top right:** Julius Colbert works full-time as the warehouse manager for the Raleigh branch of the Food Bank for Central and Eastern North Carolina. His office, which has no walls, is stationed next to the loading docks where pantry operators line up their trucks to haul away tons of food to those in need.

**Middle right:** Cabbage rotting in a field. Each year in the United States, billions of pounds of food rot or are thrown away instead of going to the millions of people who experience food insecurity. This head of cabbage became compost for next year’s plantings.

**Bottom right:** Containers of various Nutrisystem prepackaged products at the Raleigh food bank. The warehouse is full of bins like these, often stacked with products from charity food drives. The food from drives is free to pantry operators, who purchase other goods for pennies on the dollar.



ades, while existing pantries have gotten larger. Such increases have merely created more access points for pent-up demand, Berner says. For example, after Hurricane Floyd flooded eastern North Carolina in 1999, the Raleigh food bank established temporary food-assistance agencies down east.

“Those agencies never closed,” Berner says. “Demand there has never been close to being met.”

Berner says it’s tempting for the government to try to solve the deep-rooted problems that beset people who seek help with food. But a simpler and more practical approach, she says, might involve attention to supply-side issues, such as providing refrigerators, freezers, and other resources to food banks and pantries.

“If we really want to address hunger,” she says, “maybe we should focus on the barriers that limit pantries and other food providers, rather than on the seemingly intractable problems of individuals.” 



From left: Sharon Paynter, Maureen Berner, and Donn Young. Photo by Katie Bowler.

*Maureen Berner is a professor in the School of Government at UNC and Sharon Paynter is an assistant professor of political science at East Carolina University. Donn Young is an award-winning photojournalist whose work has appeared in nine books and national publications such as Time, Newsweek, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and USA Today. Brenda Johnson is the minister of Recruiters for Christ, a nondenominational church and mission in Dunn, North Carolina. Kelley O’Brien is now the director of the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium in UNC’s School of Government. The School of Law’s Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity gave Berner a ten-thousand dollar grant to hire grad student Emily Anderson to collect data from pantries in central and eastern North Carolina.*

14 endeavors

# Hunger Numbers

graphics by Jason Smith

## 36,000,000

people in the United States experience food insecurity, meaning that their lack of money and other resources limits their access to food

## Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina:

### 480,000

people within the food bank’s service area struggle to put food on the table

### 40,000

total square feet of floor space at the headquarters on Tar Heel Drive in Raleigh

## 5 branches

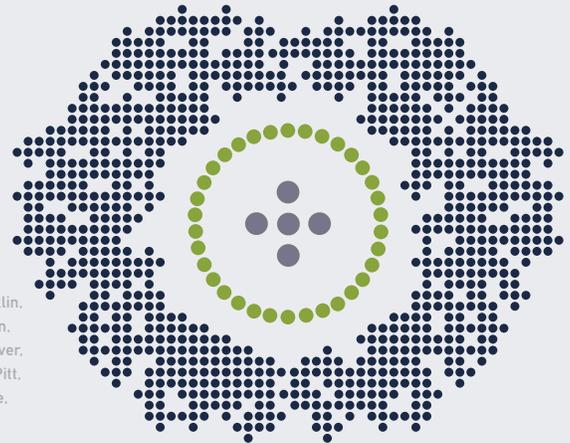
of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern N.C.

(Raleigh, Durham, Greenville, Southern Pines, Wilmington)

## support 34 counties

in North Carolina

(Brunswick, Carteret, Chatham, Columbus, Craven, Duplin, Durham, Edgecombe, Franklin, Granville, Greene, Halifax, Harnett, Johnston, Jones, Lee, Lenoir, Moore, Nash, New Hanover, Onslow, Orange, Pamlico, Pender, Person, Pitt, Richmond, Sampson, Scotland, Vance, Wake, Warren, Wayne, Wilson)

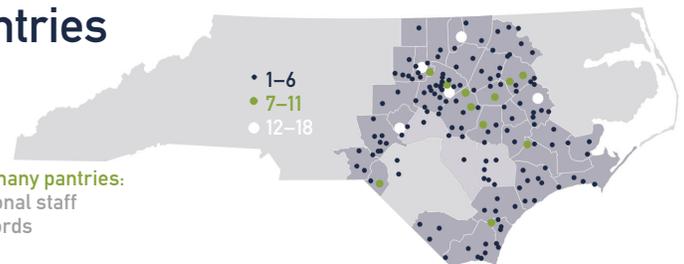


## and 870 member agencies

(soup kitchens, senior centers, day cares, pantries, etc.)

## Number of pantries

served by the Food Bank of Central and Eastern N.C. (by zip code)

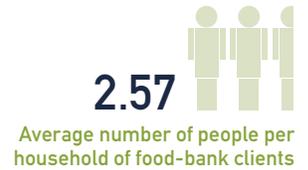
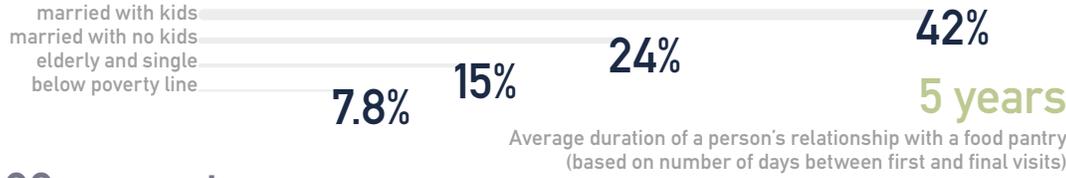


Berner and Paynter found that many pantries:

- have no (or very few) professional staff
- do not have computerized records
- rely on donated space
- depend on the support of a single individual, often an older, female volunteer
- depend on the support of a religious institution

# Backgrounds of clients

at the food banks Berner and Paynter studied:

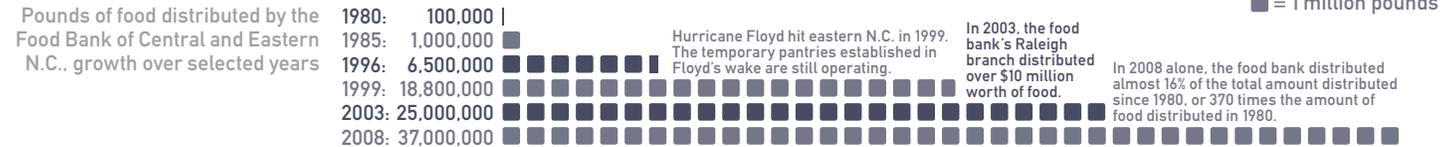


**38 percent** of food bank clients are the working poor: people who work hard and still have to choose between eating and other necessities such as medicine and housing

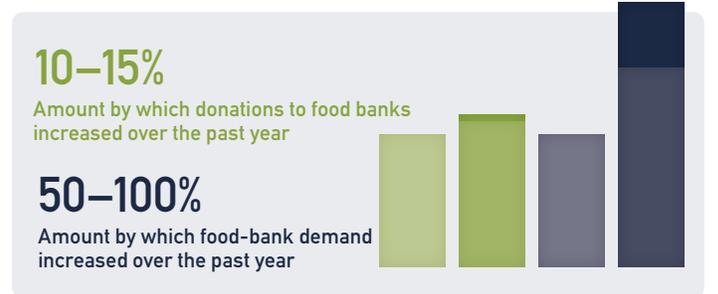


**236,000,000**

Total pounds of food distributed by the Food Bank of Central and Eastern N.C. since 1980



# Food security status of U.S. households, 2007



**2,000,000,000**  
Pounds of food distributed nationally in 2005 by nonprofit group Feeding America

\* = 1 billion pounds

SOURCES: MAUREEN BERNER AND SHARON PAYNTER; FOOD BANK OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA; FEEDING AMERICA; UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE; NEW YORK TIMES

**96,000,000,000**  
Pounds of food wasted each year in the United States (USDA estimate)