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"Food Safety Education and Disparities in North Carolina Emergency Food"

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Abstract:
Each year, an estimated 48 million Americans (1 in 6) contract foodborne illness (Scallan, 2011) stemming from grocery stores, hospitals, day care centers, church banquets, county fairs, restaurants, private homes, schools, and even food banks (CDC FOOD, 2011). However, little research has explored the potential connection between food-insecure populations and risk of foodborne illness, especially for emergency foods (c.f. Henley et al., 2012; Koro et al., 2010; Quinlan, 2013). For the majority of people who seek food assistance, food pantries are a fixed part of food sources; that is, the pantries are for subsistence and no longer just "emergency food" (Feeding America, 2010).

Food pantries in North Carolina, like in many states, exist in a regulatory desert outside of food inspection requirements at any level of government, leaving pantry managers and volunteers serving a vulnerable population without written operating procedures, formal food handling training, or guidance regarding foodborne illness risk. In North Carolina, there are approximately 2,500 food pantries, many that partner with local Feeding America food banks and others that operate completely independently, many that receive food donations from numerous local and distant sources each week, and all that operate outside the traditional food system. With an ardent concentration on food access and availability, the managers who run the pantries have varying levels of food safety education. This mixed-methods research is compiled from interviews and observations in 105 urban, rural, and suburban food pantries in 12 counties across North Carolina and explores the dissimilarities within its food pantry system.

This analysis focuses on institutional risk, which is the risk generated by the uncertainties resulting from government policies and regulations, as well as plans for risk mitigation. The food safety procedures are evaluated against a modified version of the North Carolina Food Establishment Inspection Report, the instrument employed by health inspectors to determine food establishment letter grades. Using those scores and supplemental data collected in the food pantries, effectiveness of current operating procedures and the extent to which emergency food providers are able to respond to a recall or foodborne illness outbreak are measured and evaluated.

Overall, this research examines whether food pantries have the means and education to keep the food for distribution as safe as possible. To the extent that it could change behavior, the policy implications of the findings suggest the creation of food safety guidance specific to food pantries

and potentially regulatory change. At a minimum, this research reveals how pantry managers take steps to mitigate the risk of foodborne illness in an especially vulnerable population.