

Emergency Food Programs

Food Preferences Study

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND:

Food insecurity is a growing concern in the United States, particularly in view of the current economic recession and rising food prices. According to Feeding America (Cohen 2006), since 2001 65% of pantries, 61% of soup kitchens, and 52% of shelters have seen an increase in the number of guests who come to their programs; and, those programs reported that the food bank network is their largest food supplier. While food insecurity and the demand for emergency food continue to increase, the nation is simultaneously facing an obesity epidemic. Food insecurity is associated with poorer quality diets and obesity (Olsen 1999, Townsend 2001, and Adams 2003). Links between food insecurity and obesity are not well understood, but one contributor is the lower cost of energy-dense foods compared to their higher cost nutrient-dense counterparts (Drewnowski 2007). Those with limited budgets that seek to minimize spending on food will aim to maximize calories for food dollars spent and turn to the emergency food network for help.

The role of food banks as major food suppliers to the chronically food insecure and nutritionally vulnerable necessitates consideration of the nutritional impact of their food donation and distribution policies and practices. On February 1, 2004, the Food Bank of Central New York (Food Bank) adopted a “No Soda and No Candy” Donation Policy that prohibited the receipt of soda and candy donations. The Food Bank determined that they would focus on the distribution of healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables—that are more difficult for guests to access—rather than soda and candy. A major criticism of this policy is that it limits the food choices of emergency food program (EFP) guests. This is based on the assumption that foods and beverages distributed through the EFPs are meeting guest demand. There is only very limited evidence about what foods guests would prefer to receive through EFPs. Studies suggest that guests want more fresh fruits and vegetables (Verpy 2003), but more information is needed on what types of foods and beverages guests prefer to obtain from the EFP, and what they prefer and can afford to buy. Such information is required for both EFP and Food Bank administrators to understand the needs of their guests and how to modify their policies and practices to support the health and preferences of their guests.

Study Objective:

Objective 1: Assess Emergency Food Program (EFP) guests’ preferences for foods and beverages they would like to see available at the food pantry, and factors that influence their preferences including the extent to which they prefer to receive foods of high nutritional quality.

Objective 2: Assess the EFP directors’ perceptions of guests’ food and beverage preferences, and the EFP directors’ perceptions of factors influencing their own decisions about what foods and beverages to stock and distribute through EFPs.

Study Methods:

Study Design

A cross sectional design using an interviewer administered questionnaire was used to gather information about EFP guests’ food preferences and EFP directors’ perceptions of guests’ food and beverage preferences, as well as factors influencing EFP directors’ food selection process. Fifteen food pantries were randomly selected from all large and extra large, urban and rural programs. All guests attending the programs during open hours for one day at each pantry were approached to participate in the study. An interviewer administered questionnaire was used with 116 guests and included card sorts for ranking food preferences, a Likert scale used to determine importance of receiving specific food items, and questions regarding considerations in choosing foods received at the food pantry. A similar Food Pantry Worker/Director questionnaire was administered to the directors at the selected programs. Food pantry inventory and pantry bag checklists were developed to capture what foods were offered and which foods guests chose on the data collection day. Data collection was conducted during the months of May and June 2009.

Table 1: Guests’ Considerations for Food Choices at Food Pantries

Results:

- 98% of guests indicated that having nutritious food available for them to choose at the food pantry was either very important or important
- Approximately 70% of guests did not place a priority on receiving snacks at the food pantry by reporting it was somewhat or not important to them.

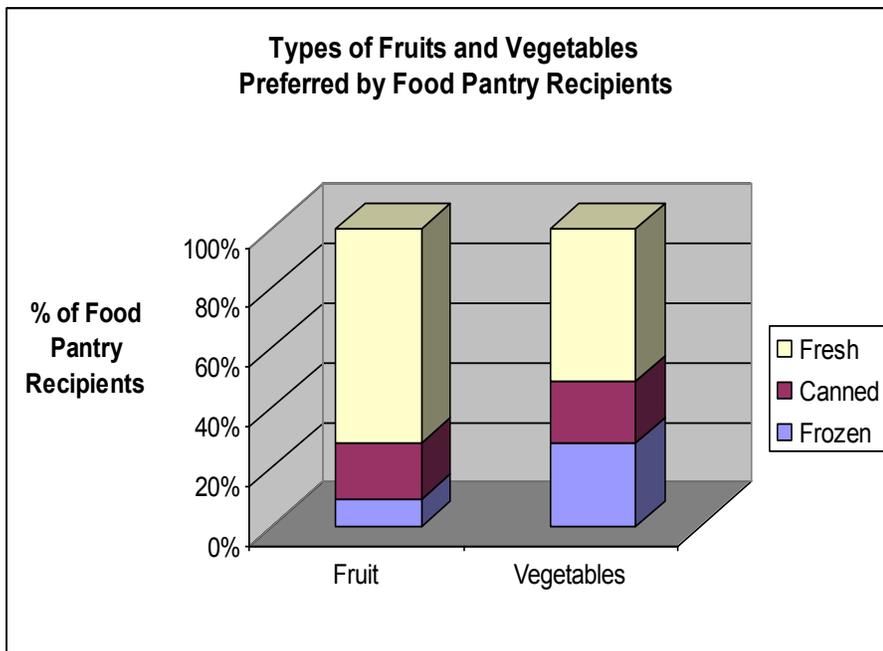
	Very Important/Important (%)	Somewhat/ Not Important (%)
Nutritious	98	3
Staple Items	94	6
Tasty	94	6
Filling	87	13
Easy to Store	83	17
Familiar	82	18
Varied	68	32
Easy to Prepare	64	26
Treats	32	68

Table 2: Mean Rank Scores for Food Pantry Items preferred by Guests

Food Item	Mean Rank	Food Item	Mean Rank
Meat/poultry/fish	3.70	Cereal	7.86
Vegetables	4.28	Soup	9.54
Fruit	4.52	Frozen meals	10.18
Eggs	5.74	Peanut butter	10.44
Milk	6.18	Beans	10.53
Bread	6.39	Snacks	12.81
Cheese	6.83	Soda	14.42
Pasta/rice	7.64	Candy	14.77

- Guests ranked items they would most prefer to receive from the food pantry (1=most prefer to receive; 16=least prefer to receive; Table 2) .
- The mean rank for meat/poultry/ fish was 3.7 indicating that guests preferred to receive these items more than any others on the list (Table 2).
- Vegetables and fruits were reported as the second and third most preferred item respectively (Table 2).
- Candy was the item least preferred to receive at a food pantry by guests; soda, snack foods, and beans also ranked among the least preferred (Table 2).

Figure 1: Types of Fruits and Vegetables Preferred by Guests



- A large majority of guests reported that they preferred to receive fresh fruit (72%) rather than frozen or canned (Figure 1).
- 51% of guests said they would rather receive fresh vegetables rather than frozen or canned (Figure 1).

Discussion:

Findings from the food ranking question suggests that food pantry guests prefer to receive meat, vegetables, and fruit over soda, candy, and snack foods. In addition, respondents reported a greater interest on receiving vegetables, fruit, and meat than in getting soda, candy, and snack foods during a pantry visit. This supports the effort by the Food Bank to limit foods of minimal nutritional value while focusing on increasing the distribution of both donated and purchased fruits and vegetables. Notably, a majority of guests stated that they would prefer to receive fresh fruits (72%) and vegetables (51%). In general, food pantry guests at both rural and urban sites preferred the same type of foods.

Data from the food preferences study suggest that the Food Bank of Central New York's "No Soda and No Candy" donation policy is in line with the food preferences of guests and philosophy of food pantry directors. Most directors (80%) reported that food pantries should only provide healthy foods.

In general, the data suggests that food pantry directors accurately perceive the food preferences of their guests. However, there were still only four food pantries that offered fresh fruit and seven food pantries that offered fresh vegetables. Notably the fresh produce items offered were from the Food Bank's Produce of the Month program. From the limited food pantry bag analysis data available, it appears that most guests that reported a preference for fresh fruit and vegetables took them when offered. Additionally, guests reported a high preference for eggs and milk. Only one food pantry carried eggs on the day of data collection; and although thirteen out of the fifteen food pantries provided milk, only two carried refrigerated milk, which was the overwhelming preference of guests (75%). While it is thought that food pantry directors may not accurately perceive food preferences of their guests, this was refuted in our study. The data suggest that the biggest challenges to providing preferred foods are not attitudinal but relate to cost, inconsistent availability, and storage capacity.

Findings from this study should be used to support internal discussion regarding improvement to the infrastructure of food pantries to help support the improvement of foods distributed at food pantries. Guests' preferences may be used to guide food donors, purchasers, and dietitians when determining the product mix to distribute as well as what types of foods may need promotion. Guests overwhelmingly reported that nutrition was a very important consideration when choosing foods at the food pantry.