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Evaluation of the Demographics, Socioeconomics, and Satisfaction Levels of Recipients at a Rural Food Bank

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Abstract. The present study assesses the demographics, socioeconomics, behaviors, environment, and satisfaction of food bank clients as a way to inform food bank administrators about where their services could be more efficiently focused. Unfortunately, very little has been published in the research literature about levels of recipient satisfaction at food banks in any settings, but especially in rural settings. This descriptive study used existing demographic and socioeconomic data from intake forms at a rural food bank, in addition to the responses of a convenience sample of 44 foodbank recipients to the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8). The data were used to assess the socioeconomic characteristics of recipients at a rural food bank and their satisfaction level with services provided. Findings indicate high levels of satisfaction among these food bank recipients. Also, small older-adult-dominated households reported higher overall income than larger households with working parents and children. Findings suggest that food banks focus their efforts, especially outreach, on the needs of young families who do not receive regular government benefits such as Social Security.

Keywords: *food bank, rural, client satisfaction, older adults, children, Social Security*

International guidelines suggest that one's food security should be guaranteed as a right (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 1996); however, one in five U.S. children live in households experiencing food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014). This alarming situation results in part from the fact that food insecurity in the United States is addressed from a residual, needs-based approach. The result is a non-comprehensive patchwork of federal, state, local, and non-profit programs that only partly meet the food security needs of poorer citizens of this country, and completely fail to meet the needs of many sub-populations (Anderson, 2013). At the federal level, this patchwork of programs includes commonly known programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Food Stamps; school breakfast, lunch and after school programs; and Women Infants & Children (WIC). There are also other lesser-known programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); Summer Nutrition Programs; and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP); among others (Food Research and Action Center, 2014). While these programs provide important services, they do not adequately meet the food security of most recipients; thus, food banks in various forms fill in the service gaps left by these federal programs.

Unfortunately, the food bank experience often demeans recipients. As an illustration of this, Anderson (2013) points out that food bank recipients face some of the following obstacles: 1) the tendency of food banks to distribute as much food as possible to needy individuals, regardless of quality; 2) the cultural belief that it is solely the individual's responsibility to maintain one's own food security; and 3) the fact that the intake process to receive foods from

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both public and private non-profit food assistance programs is complicated, inhumane, and a general nuisance (see also, Bhattarai, Duffy & Raymond, 2005). In other words, the provision of food security in the United States from government and non-profit providers is dominated by the residual approach to social welfare. In this approach social services are seen as temporary, emergency functions to be withdrawn when the family and the market resume their proper roles as the “natural channel” for meeting food security needs (Hölscher, 2008).

The residual perspective’s focus on individual rather than social responsibility is a fundamental problem of the food bank experience in the United States (Anderson, 2013). One way to overcome this problem is to empower food bank recipients by assessing their perspectives, characteristics, environments, and opinions in order to determine whether they are indeed satisfied and if the services and products they receive meet their needs. Unfortunately, there appears to be no published evaluation of client satisfaction at a food bank that addresses the question: “Are food bank recipients satisfied with their food bank experience?” Although Mabli, Cohen, Potter, and Zhao, (2010) recently prepared a report for Feeding America in which they investigated many aspects of client satisfaction in a national sample of food bank recipients, there is no professional, peer-reviewed, journal article that investigates or assesses client satisfaction among food bank recipients. This mirrors a general attitude, confirmed by the literature, that since the food is free, recipients should be satisfied and grateful (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008; Blau, 1986; Duffy et al., 2006; Kicinski, 2012; Poppendieck, 1998). Thus, researchers have hitherto largely ignored client satisfaction among food bank recipients.

However, client satisfaction is not the only way to assess the quality of food bank service provision. Because client satisfaction surveys notoriously collect overwhelmingly positive responses with a “predictably positive skew” (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2010, p. 177), it is important to assess the perspective and environment of food bank recipients. This can be done by investigating the general sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics of food bank recipients to determine whether their food security needs are being met. Unfortunately, evaluation research on food banks and other private food assistance programs lacks uniformity and typically uses food bank employees as a source of data rather than the recipients themselves (Berner, et al., 2008; Mosely & Tiehen, 2004). This approach misses an important opportunity to assess the perspective of clients and suggests a more efficient focus of food bank services. Measuring customer satisfaction with uniform, quantitative methods and investigating food bank recipient demographics are valuable additions to the food bank-related literature. Thus, the research questions for this study are: What are the client satisfaction levels of food bank recipients? Also, how might recipient socio-demographic characteristics inform the provision of quality services in a rural food bank?

Beliefs and Values about Poverty Interventions

Among the theoretical approaches to understanding food security for low-income households, the individualistic attribution is often the dominant focus. The individualistic perspective traces the causes of poverty back to the purported shortcomings of the individual, thus the individual is blamed and therefore held responsible for their poverty (Anderson, 2013; Bullock, 2004; Duffy et al., 2006). The dominance of the individualistic explanation for poverty in American culture creates a significant social and emotional obstacle for individuals who suffer food insecurity.

What is needed in the fight against poverty in the United States is a paradigmatic shift where provision of food security is viewed from a rights-based approach rather than the traditional residual, individualistic approach that dominates the current social service system (Anderson, 2013; Jarosz, 2011). As Anderson (2013) has eloquently stated, “thinking about access to healthy food as a right, rather than a privilege of those with sufficient purchasing power to buy good food, fundamentally changes how we see causes of and solutions to food insecurity” (p. 113). Anderson (2013) argues that there would be promising and lasting impacts from a shift to a rights-based approach to food security, including, fewer childhood developmental problems caused by food insecurity, greater dignity for the recipients of food assistance, and an increase in the adoption of environmentally sound farming practices.

National Anti-Poverty Programs for Food Security

Unfortunately, a rights-based approach to food security in the United States is still only a dream. In 2013, food insecurity was a problem for approximately 17.5 million Americans, roughly 14% of the population (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2014). This means that 17.5 million Americans had difficulty at some time during that year providing enough food for their household. The federal response to food insecurity includes programs such as: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Lunch Program (NSLP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) (Anderson, 2013). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) supports a majority of America’s poor in their efforts to acquire foods (Anderson, 2013; Tanner, 2013). However, benefits from SNAP and other federal anti-poverty programs do not provide low-income families with sufficient nutrition (Zhang & Lamichhane, 2014; Jensen, 2002; Olson, Rauschenbach, Frongillo, & Kendall, 1996; Rose, Gundersen, & Oliveira, 1998). The shortcomings of federal assistance programs in alleviating food insecurity are especially evident when one considers that 62% of food-insecure households are participants in one or more of the top three of those programs (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014).

For many, the Old Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance Program (OASDI), commonly known as “Social Security,” provides some relief from the effects of poverty and disability (Glasmeyer, 2006). The number of retired workers and dependents receiving Social Security benefits has been steadily increasing to 40,801,365 recipients as of 2013 (Social Security, 2013). For 66% of older adults who receive Social Security, this was their primary income source (Barusch, 2012). In spite of the fact that Social Security is a somewhat viable source of income for older adults, 8.7% of households with an older adult present still report food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014). Thus, like the other aforementioned federal programs, it would appear that Social Security is only partially ameliorating food insecurity among older adults.

Nonprofit and Private Anti-Poverty Assistance for Food Security

Unfortunately, there is also room for critique of nonprofit and private food assistance programs and the social/cultural realities that surround the provision of assistance from these food pantries. Low-income individuals tend to seek support from non-profit organizations while also receiving support from government programs, such as Social Security and SNAP (Bhattari,

Duffy, & Raymond, 2005; Berner et al., 2008; Daponte, Lewis, Sanders, & Taylor, 1998; Duffy et al., 2006; Mabli et al., 2010). Unfortunately, staff at many non-profit food banks believe that food bank recipients simply need to work harder, change their behaviors, and pull themselves out of poverty by their own efforts (Barusch, 2012; Duffy et al., 2006). This thinking may be impacted by the differences in the recipients' lower socioeconomic background relative to that of program employees or volunteers (Anderson, 2013; Berner et al., 2008; Blau, 1986; Duffy et al., 2006; Kicinski, 2012; Poppendieck, 1998).

This discordance between workers and recipients is even more severe at rural nonprofit and private food banks where recipients are more likely to face humiliation and stigma (Bhattari et al., 2005; Molnar et al., 2001; Nooney et al., 2013). These rural food bank recipients also tend to suffer more food insecurity due to service systems that fail to deliver quality services (Holben, McClincy, Holcomb, Dean, & Walker, 2004; Huddleston-Casas, Charnigo, & Simmons, 2009). Occasionally food banks directors even view recipients with suspicion rather than showing sympathy and respect (Duffy et al., 2006).

Consequences of Food Insecurity among Rural Populations

In general, exposure to food insecurity is more pronounced in rural regions than urban or suburban areas because rural job markets are limited (Henderson & Akers, 2009). Children in rural low-income households are more vulnerable to poor nutrition because of lower quality foods provided (Sharkey, Dean, & Johnson, 2011). A majority of foods provided by food banks are not nutritionally balanced, which makes children more vulnerable to nutrition-related health issues, such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Children with poor nutrition intake are also vulnerable to low academic achievement (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Alaimo, Olson, Frongillo, & Briefel, 2001; Anderson, 1990; Casey et al., 2005; Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2011; Jyoti, Frongillo, & Jones, 2005; Matheson, Varady, Varady, & Killen, 2002; USDA, 2009; Verpy, Smith, & Reicks, 2003). There is, therefore, much to be concerned about among the rural poor who seek assistance from food banks, especially those households with young children.

As a matter of equity and social justice, food bank recipients should not have to face any more stigma in their procurement of food at a food bank than they would when visiting their local grocery store. If food banks wish to reach the greatest number of people possible with their services, then they should ensure that stigma and bureaucracy are not chasing away potential recipients. In addition, as with any business, it makes sense that food banks put forth efforts to understand the sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and other pertinent characteristics of their recipients so that they can specifically tailor services to recipients.

Past Evaluation Methods at Food Banks

Many food banks have been critically evaluated, using qualitative research methods. Qualitative inquiry in the form of focus groups (Verpy et al., 2003) or case studies (Molnar et al., 2001) is well-suited for addressing the unique and specific issues that arise in individual food banks. However, the nature of qualitative sampling methods and the small sample sizes make it impossible to generalize the findings to a broader national level.

Few studies of food banks use longitudinal designs to collect long-term data from recipients and likewise few national studies of this population have been conducted (e.g., Mosley & Tiehen, 2004). The obvious exception is the recently completed report by Mabli, et al. (2010), which used a national sample of over 65,000 food bank recipients. One reason for these research deficiencies may be that while nonprofit and private food organizations have the advantage of working closely with low-income individuals in a community setting, they are not well-suited to contribute to the nationwide effort to evaluate (especially longitudinally) the entire food assistance system in the United States. Local, rural food banks serve a diverse and often transient reciprocity in different locations, but are often ill-equipped to maintain consistent records and documentation. This record keeping deficiency dramatically complicates long-term analyses and forces evaluators to rely primarily on staff feedback as a source of data.

Recipient Satisfaction Scales in Other Settings

Client satisfaction is a common evaluation focus when studying other populations (e.g., Attkisson, & Greenfield, 2004); however, it seems largely ignored in food bank research. Since most food banks are run by private and nonprofit organizations and are often administered by volunteers, they sometimes lack structured intake forms (Molnar et al., 2001), and are not equipped to collect or interpret client satisfaction data. The lower socioeconomic status of food bank recipients can also lead to the expectation among food bank staff that recipients should appreciate free food, and whether they are satisfied is not critical (Berner et al., 2008; Blau, 1986; Duffy et al., 2006; Kicinski, 2012; Poppendieck, 1998). In reality, a regular assessment of client satisfaction using a uniform tool could enhance communication and relationships between employees and recipients; however, there is little evidence that such assessments are used in the food bank arena (Garland & Besinger, 1996; Royse et al., 2010; Sutherland et al., 2012).

Satisfaction data among food bank recipients were recently collected and reported by staff at Mathematica Policy Research in a national assessment. This research was part of the Hunger in America 2010 report prepared for Feeding America (Mabli et al., 2010). The authors used a set of simple, proprietary client satisfaction questions to assess satisfaction, but they did not appear to use a standardized, reliable, and psychometrically evaluated client satisfaction scale, such as the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8) (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983). The CSQ-8 (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983) documents satisfaction level among clients in a quantitative manner, and has been used to assess services at many types of agencies (e.g., Garland & Besinger, 1996; Sutherland et al., 2012). Given that food banks are essential to improving food security in the United States, researchers should consider assessing client satisfaction in food banks in order to ensure satisfactory service delivery.

Methods

This study was intended as a framework for enacting improvements at a rural food bank located in the eastern United States. This particular food bank provides free fresh produce, eggs, and some dairy products to low-income individuals and families, rather than the non-perishable foods traditionally provided at a food bank. The socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics of the area served by this food bank are as follows. The community is surrounded by farmland with some significant manufacturing and distribution facilities serving as major local economic engines (Fisher, Lyman, Butts, & Mosher, 2014). The total population in 2010

was 27,920, up 4000 from the 2000 census data (Fisher, Lyman, Butts, & Mosher, 2014). The median age in the area is 29.8 years, substantially lower than the state median of 40.1 years due to the presence of a small state university in the area. Of the 10,091 households in the community, 28.2% included children under 18 years old and 11% included people 65 years old and over. The area is made up of a 93.2% White/Caucasian population with much smaller Black/African American (3.5%) and Hispanic/Latino (2.8%) populations. The poverty rate in the area increased 7% during the last recession to 19.75%, which is 13% higher than the state average. The median income for the area is \$47,314, which is lower than the state median of \$52,267 (Fisher, Lyman, Butts, & Mosher, 2014). The unemployment rate is 4.5%, which is lower than the state rate of 8.5%.

The overall purpose of this formative evaluation was primarily to evaluate recipients' satisfaction, but also their basic demographics. The present article reports the quantitative sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and consumer satisfaction data collected during the evaluation.

Protection for Research Participants

This research was conducted only after receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board and from the Board President of the organization. No identifying information was collected during the data collection, and informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

Measures

Recipient Demographic Analysis. Board members at the food bank provided the research team with hard copies of the intake forms completed for all first-time recipients during the 2012 calendar year with all identifying information redacted. These forms included self-reported information organized by household regarding age, employment, wages, other income, monthly expenses, and debts. The agency also provided attendance data collected by food bank volunteers for the first quarter (January-March) of 2013. Researchers also calculated the average age of each household and the distance that each recipient traveled to receive services from the food bank as a part of this demographic analysis.

Recipient Satisfaction Survey. The Customer Satisfaction Research Team (CSRT) developed the proprietary Recipient Satisfaction Survey (RSS) (Arnold, Berry, Bobby, Houck, & Shanahan, 2013) based on items requested by the Board of Directors of the food bank and the research team. Some questions were taken directly from Le Meur's (2011) study of food banks, and asked questions such as the number of times the recipient had used the program and the convenience of the hours of operation.

The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8). The Recipient Satisfaction Survey incorporated the entire CSQ-8 which is made up of eight Likert-scale questions (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983). The CSQ-8 is a standardized instrument with excellent reliability which has been used in numerous studies measuring client and staff satisfaction in health, mental health, and human service programs (e.g., Attkisson & Greenfield, 2004; Attkisson & Zwick, 1982; Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979; Nguyen, Attkisson, & Stegner, 1983). The

internal consistency of the CSQ-8 has been reported as reliable (Cronbach's α ranging from .83 to .93) (Sederer, Dickey, & Hermann, 1996). The CSQ-8 has also been used to evaluate the criterion-related validity of newer client satisfaction instruments (e.g., Noda, et al., 2012), and yielded satisfactory internal consistency in this research (Cronbach's α value of .78).

Data Collection Procedure

Socioeconomic and sociodemographic data came from existing agency intake forms and reports. The RSS was distributed over the course of three Tuesday evenings when recipients collected their produce. Recipients were chosen using a convenience sampling procedure.

Sample

Demographic and attendance data were provided by the agency for 194 households who accessed services from the food bank during the calendar year 2012. Attendance data for that sample were also provided for the first three months of 2013. A convenience sample totaling 44 recipients successfully completed the Recipient Satisfaction Survey.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were statistically processed through the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software (Version 22.0). Descriptive statistics were used to report demographic characteristics of the sample, correlational analyses were used to investigate relationships between various demographic and satisfaction variables, and independent sample *t*-tests were used to assess differences between selected subgroups in the sample.

Results

Demographic Analysis of Food Bank Recipients

The food bank in this study primarily serves a White/Caucasian population (72.7%), although small numbers of other racial and ethnic groups are represented (see Table 1). The average number of people living in a recipient's household was relatively small ($M = 2.74$, $SD=1.73$) and the modal reported household size was one household member; the largest reported household size was nine.

Recipient age and income findings. A correlation analysis of household monthly expenses data showed significant moderate positive relationships between household size and the following monthly expenses: electricity expenses $r(192) = .36$, $p < .001$; auto expenses, including gasoline $r(192) = .34$, $p < .001$; and food expenses $r(192) = .45$, $p < .001$.

Table 1

Race/Ethnicity of Recipients

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
White/Caucasian	145	74.7
Black/African American	7	3.6
Hispanic	4	2.1
Another Race Not Specified	5	2.6
Missing Data	33	17

A similar correlational analysis of the total household income found a significant moderate positive relationship between the size of the household and the total monthly earned income, $r(192) = .43$, $p < .001$. There was nothing close to a significant finding with the other income variables: income from non-employment sources, total monthly income, and total yearly income. This suggests that households with more members are more likely to have more earned income, while those with fewer members have less earned income. This becomes more meaningful with the further analysis of household income where there is an older adult present.

Of the 194 households from which socioeconomic and sociodemographic data were collected, approximately one-fifth (21.6%) reported having an older adult or person with a disability living in the home as indicated by their receiving Social Security. It turns out that the total yearly income for those households receiving Social Security ($M = \$17,675.19$, $SD = \$6,530.81$) was significantly higher ($t(192) = -6.21$, $p < .001$) than those without this income ($M = \$9670.04$, $SD = \$7,616.04$). On a related note, the size of the households with a Social Security recipient ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.17$) was significantly smaller ($t(100.38) = 4.63$, $p < .001$) than those without a Social Security recipient present ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.79$). Surprisingly, yearly income in households where an adult was employed ($M = \$7,528.77$, $SD = \$3,955.83$) was significantly lower ($t(131.09) = -5.77$, $p < .001$) than in those households where there was no employed adult ($M = \$13,935.69$, $SD = \$9,168.46$).

An additional variable was created to calculate the collective average age of the households receiving services from the food bank. The overall average household member age was 43 ($SD = 19.98$; range = 83.5, 10.5, 94). A correlational analysis of the average household size with various demographic variables found a significant strong negative relationship between the average age of the household and the number of people in the household, $r(192) = -.66$, $p < .001$. There were also significant moderate negative correlations between average household age and the following socioeconomic variables: hourly rate of pay at place of employment, $r(192) = -.41$, $p < .001$; hours per week worked at place of employment, $r(192) = -.43$, $p < .001$; and

monthly income from employment, $r(192) = -.44, p < .001$. Conversely, there was a significant moderate positive correlation between average household age and monthly income from sources other than employment, $r(192) = .33, p < .001$.

When taken together, these *t*-test and correlational findings suggest that smaller households were more likely to be made up of older adults who receive Social Security and in those households, there was very little income earned through employment. Yet, in those small, older-adult-dominated households, there was more overall income. There was a negative relationship between age of the household and employment income, but a positive relationship between age of the household and non-employment income from Social Security.

Attendance findings. Food bank recipients received assistance an average of 2.95 ($SD = 3.39$) weeks during the first twelve weeks of 2013 ($Mdn = 2.00$ weeks). There was a small significant positive correlation, $r(192) = .20, p = .006$, between the number of weeks recipients attended the food bank and their total yearly income. This suggests that those with higher incomes were more likely to attend the food bank. Based on anecdotal observations and the previous findings about older adults and their income, it is likely that older adults are more likely to consistently seek services from the food bank.

Employment and other income findings. Of 194 food bank recipients, 174 were currently employed at a minimum of at least one job. Fifteen recipients worked at two or more places of employment, and three had three places of employment.

A total of 67 recipients of the food bank's services received federal Food Stamp benefits. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether recipients who received Food Stamps attended the food bank more often than those who did not receive Food Stamps. The test was insignificant $t(192) = -.08, p = .94$, suggesting that people who receive Food Stamps ($M = 2.99, SD = 3.16$) and those who do not receive Food Stamps ($M = 2.94, SD = 3.52$) attend the food bank about the same number of times. Similarly, insignificant findings arose from a *t*-test analysis of the income variables, debt variables, and expense variables for food stamp recipients versus non-food stamp recipients. Thus it appears that the receipt of food stamp benefits does not set recipients apart from those who do not receive those benefits in any statistically significant way.

General Client Satisfaction Analysis

The previous demographic findings relate to the recipients of the food bank as a whole. A smaller sample of those recipients completed the RSS. During the collection of these client satisfaction data from this sub-sample, a separate set of demographic variables were collected. The sample consisted primarily of females (77.3%; $N = 34$), while 22.7% ($N = 10$) were males. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 62 years of age, with 6.8% of recipients between ages 18 to 28, and 20.5% between ages 29 and 39. A large portion of the sample (38.6%) ranged between age 40 to 50; 15.9% were between ages 51 to 61, and the remaining 18.2% were 62 years or older. A large percentage (91%) of the participants had a high school education or higher.

Recipient responses to the open-ended questions on the RSS indicate that 80% of recipients saw no need for improvement in food bank services; however, some recipients

suggested the provision of additional staples, such as gas vouchers, cleaning products, and a more varied selection of foods. The second question dealt with transportation, and as would be expected from previous transportation analyses, little significance was found. The third and fourth questions dealt with likes and dislikes about the organization. As with the first question, most people (84%) answered in a way that suggested they did not dislike any aspect of their foodbank experience. The only dislike reported was that the time for distribution of the produce was inconvenient.

Client Satisfaction Results

The RSS asked the food bank recipients, “How satisfied are you with the [food bank]?” and then had them rate their satisfaction with the following: service of staff, quality of food, accessibility of building, and hours of operation. No recipient gave a score of “Not Satisfied;” and no response related to services provided was less than “Satisfied.” Of the four items, the item related to quality of food showed the lowest average satisfaction, but still ranked between the “Very Satisfied” and “Satisfied” range. Overall, 52.3% of respondents to the survey gave the agency a perfect “Very Satisfied” rating across all four service areas. For the recipients of this food bank, that average satisfaction score was 93.6% of the possible perfect score.

Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8) Results

Because the CSQ-8 (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983) has eight questions based on a four-point Likert scale, the highest possible satisfaction score is a 32. Just under forty-six percent (45.5%) of study participants scored the agency at a perfect 32. The mean scores across all eight of the CSQ-8 items ranges from 3.66-3.90. The highest score was on the question relating to whether the respondent would recommend the program; the lowest score was on the question asking if the services helped the clients deal more effectively with their problems. The overall mean score on the CSQ-8 as a whole was a 30.53 out of 32 ($SD = 2.07$).

Discussion

Demographic Analysis: Differing Levels of Food Insecurity

Study results illustrate the realities faced by people in poverty who use both federal programs and private food bank services in a rural setting. First, a counterintuitive conclusion from this study is that employed food bank recipients are generally less financially secure than unemployed recipients. In larger households where there are young children present, there was less income reported than in smaller households with an older adult present. Yet, in the current sample, the households with young children were more likely to include at least one employed adult. This was illustrated by the negative correlation between average household age and hourly rate of pay, hours per week worked, and monthly income from employment.

As expected, among sampled food bank recipients, older people who receive Social Security as their primary annual income tend to enjoy more food security. The findings reported here mirror those of Zhang & Lamichhane (2014) who concluded that food bank recipients with children in the household faced a greater threat of food insecurity during the recent recession than the general population. Similarly, in their analysis of food security among households with

varying compositions, Coleman-Jensen et al. (2014) found the lowest rates of “very low food security” among households where there was an older adult present or an older adult was living alone. It appears that findings reflect those of other authors (Barusch, 2012; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014; Glasmeir, 2006), suggesting that government benefits, such as Social Security, play a major role in bringing older adults and disabled adults one step further from poverty than their younger counterparts who do not have access to such benefits.

In this sample, families with young children struggled to meet their nutritional needs despite the fact that the average number of hours worked was 32.1 hours, and nearly ten percent of the recipients had two or more jobs. Also, it is clear from these findings and the literature (e.g., Tanner, 2013) that food stamps (SNAP) reciprocity does little to ameliorate poverty since those who received food stamps were just as likely to receive food bank services as those who did not have access to food stamps. In either case, it is clear that larger households with young children present have fewer institutionalized government benefits available to them, and face greater economic hardship than smaller households with older adults present. In addition, for many younger families with children, employment by itself is not a poverty panacea and is not enough to pull a family above the poverty level.

One clear conclusion from these findings is that the purposes of the Social Security system have been somewhat fulfilled, and those who receive these benefits enjoy some poverty relief. Unfortunately, for employed, young families with children who are not eligible to receive Social Security benefits, poverty and food insecurity remain in their reality. In fact, these findings coincide with recent reports that the majority of children (51%) in public schools in the United States come from low income families (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). The moderate success of Social Security in alleviating poverty among older adults lends credence to Anderson’s (2013) argument that governments should approach food security with a human rights perspective rather than with an underfunded patchwork of stigmatizing programs (Nooney et al., 2013) that fail to ensure that all families, not just older adults, have the food they need.

Client Satisfaction at Nonprofit and Private Food Organizations

Unlike past evaluations of food banks, this work is the first published formal evaluation of a food bank that used the CSQ-8 to measure client satisfaction (e.g., Michalski, 2003a; Michalski, 2003b; Molnar et al., 2001; Popielarski & Cotugna, 2010; Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999; Verpy et al., 2003). As expected with many client satisfaction evaluations, the study was successful in showing high satisfaction level among recipients (Mabli et al., 2010; Royse et al., 2010).

While client satisfaction findings are expectedly positive (Mabli et al., 2010; Royse et al., 2010), it is still worthwhile for food banks to consider simple tools such as the CSQ-8 (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983) as a regular part of food bank documentation. This would enable staff/funders to consistently collect satisfaction data from program recipients as a part of an ongoing evaluative process. Food banks that collect such data could be well positioned to accrue funding and enhance service provision for recipients.

Limitations

There are a number of inherent limitations associated with the use of existing data in a fledgling social service agency. For example, there were instances when sampling procedures were not consistently applied due to the realities of collecting data while participants are more focused on receiving their weekly allotment of fresh produce. In addition, the data collection period was not long enough to ensure a representative sample of all recipients. The number of recipients who completed the CSQ-8 (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983) and the RSS was quite small (n=44). Furthermore, there is potential bias in the data because subjects were conveniently surveyed only when they volunteered to participate in the study during produce distribution. This may have impacted the client satisfaction level data in particular, because recipients who were not willing to fill out a survey may also not be satisfied with services, and less likely to volunteer to complete a survey, and vice versa. Also, one small, rural, organization does not represent private and nonprofit food assistance programs in other regions and service settings.

Recommendations

While the food bank services and products are clearly beneficial, it is essential for private and nonprofit organizations to explore solutions to help meet recipients' needs, especially the needs of families with young children. Thus, interventions that would benefit young families should be a priority for food banks.

Follow-up client satisfaction research in other diverse settings with a larger and representative sample would enhance the performance of food banks in the United States. Because the CSQ-8 scale (Pascoe & Attkisson, 1983) typically shows uniformly positive responses, developing additional scales to discover the more nuanced satisfaction issues for recipients at food banks is also warranted.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the importance of assessing the demographics, socioeconomics, behaviors, and environments of food bank clients, in addition to collecting client satisfaction data, as a way to evaluate food bank services. Empowering food bank recipients to be a part of the evaluation process is a necessary step toward changing the current strategy to food security toward a rights-based approach (Anderson, 2013). An eventual paradigmatic change to a rights-based approach would improve the asymmetric dynamics between workers and recipients (Anderson, 2013). Until that change occurs, there will continue to be a need for food banks and related supports and programs that help working families meet the needs that their meager employment does not.

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