

MOBILE FOOD PANTRY PROGRAM

2021 Program Evaluation Report

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Public Policy Associates, Incorporated is a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan. We serve clients in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision-making.



Prepared for

Feeding America West Michigan
Comstock Park, Michigan
www.feedwm.org

Prepared by

Public Policy Associates
Lansing, Michigan
www.publicpolicy.com

Authors

Nancy McCrohan
Anna Colby
David McConnell

Contributors

Nathalie Winans, Paige Haight, and Nathan Burroughs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of its mission to relieve hunger and increase food security, Feeding America West Michigan (FAWM) has carried out a Mobile Food Pantry Program (MFP) in 32 counties for over two decades. The MFP distributions are hosted by local agencies such as churches, schools, and community centers, and offer at no charge a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and baked goods to people in need.

In 2021 FAWM undertook a study to better understand MFP client demographics as well as perceived program value, relevance, and impacts on dietary behavior. New qualitative and quantitative information was gathered using a client survey, six focus groups with 34 clients, and seven pantry site coordinator interviews. Over 600 client surveys were completed from 31 sites in the first quarter of 2021. The study also provided a field test of the *Feeding America Client Survey* (FACS) tool—modified to be self-administered online—which was developed and made available to food banks nationally by the Feeding America national office (FANO).

THE CLIENTS

The program is serving a client base with significant economic challenges, which are likely to impact consistent access to healthy food. Notable client characteristics include:

- Approximately 79% of the clients are food insecure.
- Roughly 7 in 10 client households live below the poverty line.

More than 90% of households have some source of monthly income across household members. The most common sources are social security and/or a pension (36%), followed by a full-time job (25%), and disability income (23%).

- About 49% live in households where someone has unpaid medical bills.
- More than half of clients have had one or more recent instance of choosing between paying for food or for living expenses (e.g., utilities, medical costs, or rent/mortgage)—or, most commonly, transportation costs.

Nearly two-thirds of clients have one or more preventable chronic disease associated with diet, including 44% with high blood pressure and 35% with high cholesterol.

About one-quarter of MFP clients have accessed formal supports to get enough food for their household. For example, 27% of the client households receive SNAP benefits and 22% received a free meal during the past 30 days. Clients also utilized other strategies to get enough food for their household, such as seeking help from family and friends (54%), and buying the cheapest food available regardless of nutritional quality (63%).

In general, clients find the MFPs convenient and accessible, with few challenges. For example, 87% say it is easy to get to the Mobile Food Pantry, with a typical drive time of 16 to 18 minutes. About one in five reported that the wait time at the Mobile Food Pantry was long.

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

The vast majority of clients (90%) are interested in eating more fruits and vegetables. More than half of clients (54%) said they obtain most or all of their fresh fruit and vegetables at food distributions. Notably, most clients (91% survey, 80% focus group profile) *credit* the Mobile Food Pantry with helping them to eat more fruits and vegetables.

SATISFACTION

Clients desire a diversity of products, are eager to receive fresh fruits and vegetables, and would like to see a wider variety of produce. They are also eager to receive meats, other proteins, and dairy. Of the food typically distributed at the MFP, baked goods are the least preferred, and most likely to go to waste (50%).

The clients are very appreciative of, and try to make the most of the food provided. They try to not waste any food, find multiple ways to use the food, and share food. Most commonly, clients reported that their fresh fruit and vegetable consumption would be improved if these items cost less or were more available at the food distribution (68% and 48%, respectively). To positively influence their consumption of healthy foods, focus group participants suggested recipe cards or tips on how to use the ingredients.

There is a high degree of satisfaction with MFP products. For example, at least three-quarters of clients said they like and use all of the fruits and vegetables, but fewer (about 6 in 10) found the amount and freshness of the produce satisfactory.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

The overall client experience of the MFP distributions is notably positive. In focus groups, participants talked about being treated with kindness and respect, and expressed deep gratitude for the caring and dedicated staff and volunteers. Virtually all survey respondents reported being treated well or very well when at the Mobile Food Pantry. Nearly all rated their overall MFP experience as good or very good, and were very likely to recommend the Mobile Food Pantry to others.

OPERATIONAL CONCERNS RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC

Client choice and prepackaged boxes are salient issues to the host agencies. The prepackaged boxes add efficiency to distribution, but not knowing what is in the box can be a challenge. As

agencies contemplate various scenarios for delivering emergency food under shifting environmental conditions, the availability of volunteers is a central concern.

VALUE OF SUPPORTS

Agencies that were interviewed had no experience with nutrition and healthy eating programming attached to distributions. They did not have a clear vision for how education could be managed, but were interested in learning more about the possibility.

Recipes and nutritional information were perceived as valuable and useful by clients. They had limited exposure to information dissemination at distributions, but had positive feedback about the experience.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Use of Data

- The study provides the first set of comprehensive data on client characteristics across all five regions.
- These data can be put to use immediately in internal and external communications, and leveraged in assessing potential program improvements.

Program Value

- MFP improves access to healthy food, for a client base that is overwhelmingly food insecure, and the majority of whom have preventable chronic disease associated with diet. The program has an expansive reach geographically, and it reaches the right people.
- There is a clear interest and value in ensuring consistent delivery of a variety of food groups (produce, protein, dairy), more seasonal products, and more variety in fruits and vegetables.
- Ideally, there would remain a strong emphasis on fruits and vegetables, as this is responsive to expressed needs, clients' various food restrictions, and enables a nutrient-dense and varied diet.

Meeting Needs

- The MFP is a key resource to gain much-needed access to fresh, healthy food. This is reflected in the proportion of fresh fruit and vegetables consumed that comes from the food distribution, interest in eating more produce, and in direct attribution to MFP as aiding clients to eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Cultural differences matter because some of the agencies are serving diverse populations.
- Heeding the expressed preference for a wide variety of fresh produce, along with information about the food—especially in appropriate languages—is responsive to both the broad audience and BIPOC needs.
- BIPOC clients are also well-served by attention to familiar and traditional foods (e.g., fresh produce, dry beans, minimally processed foods).

Education

- There is no substantive history of nutrition education programming attached to distributions.
- FAWM is urged to consider a wide range of possible scenarios and roles for education programming before making any commitments.
- It should be noted that the most salient need that is most feasible to address at present is to generate product-specific flyers (e.g., storage and preparation tips, recipes) that sites could disseminate at the distributions.
- Ideally these would be shared with sites in advance to match the food products delivered that day.

Distribution Models and the Future

- The global pandemic forced sites to operate drive-up distributions instead of walk-ups. There are clear advantages to the relative safety of a drive-up model, and agencies lauded the ease of having boxes prepackaged for individual households. However, walk-ups are clearly superior for making personal connections, allowing client choice of foods, and for nutrition or healthy food education.
- In the coming months, both FAWM and local host sites are likely to face emerging questions, challenges, and opportunities around managing operations and meeting needs.
- In the current dynamic environment, the organizations should expect to consider decision-making criteria to help manage emergent issues—such as: preparing for walk-up and/or drive-up distributions; flexibility and resources for swift (pandemic-driven) changes to operations, delivery, and packaging; consistent provision of more variety of fresh produce; promoting client choice; impactful educational opportunities for sites in walk-up or drive-up scenarios; advance knowledge of the truck delivery contents; and proper role and level of readiness to commit to educational programming.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT MOBILE FOOD PANTRY

Feeding America West Michigan's (FAWM) mission is to gather and distribute food to relieve hunger and increase food security in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. This mission is manifest in many actions, including the long-standing Mobile Food Pantry Program (MFP), which has been operating since 1998. The program distributions, in partnership with local agencies, deliver to people in need a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and baked goods. The mobile pantries are hosted by churches, schools, and community centers. Mobile food pantries operate in 32 of FAWM's 40 counties, and approximately 30-40 mobile pantries occur on most weeks. In 2020, distributions moved to a drive-through model in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

EVALUATION

The purpose of the study was to better understand MFP clients, including their experience with and the explicit value they place on the MFP program. Specifically, the project objectives were to better understand:

- Client demographic characteristics
- Client experience of food insecurity
- Client perception of the program's value, relevance, and impacts on diet
- Program relevancy and cultural sensitivity
- Equitable reach of the program

The results are expected to inform decision-making about MFP programs and services in order to best serve clients and to provide information useful in grant-seeking and other fundraising.

A secondary purpose of the study was to provide a field example and lessons learned from disseminating the *Feeding America Client Survey* (FACS), modified to be self-administered and in an online format. The FACS tool was developed and made available to food banks nationally by the Feeding America national office.

The study gathered new qualitative and quantitative information using primary data-collection techniques, in order to compile a full picture of the MFP program and clients. The primary data-collection techniques included a client survey, client focus groups, and pantry site coordinator interviews. All data collection was conducted online or over the phone. The survey data were gathered from over 600 clients at 32 distributions early in 2021, which in aggregate were estimated to serve 4,750 (duplicated) households. The study also included a review of secondary demographic data of the areas surrounding certain MFP locations. Questions about both process and outcomes were addressed in the analysis and are shared in this final report.

REPORT NAVIGATION

- The chapter on services and those served provides findings related to the services, client need and supports, and the ease of access to MFP.
- The chapter on outcomes presents findings related to client experience and satisfaction with MFP, value of supports, consumption of healthy food, and ability of agencies to meet needs of diverse clients.
- Survey responses were assessed for statistical differences across groups: five regions; urban-rural binary; and race-ethnicity binary. Very few differences emerged. Where there were statistically significant and conceptually noteworthy differences, these are reported throughout the report. Where race/ethnicity analysis breakouts are presented, the data are binary, with 78% non-Hispanic white and 22% persons of color. Proportions presented are weighted, and number of cases are unweighted.
- Study methods, including sampling and weighting, are described in the technical appendix.

SERVICES AND THOSE SERVED

In this chapter, findings are presented on the services, client need and supports, and the ease of access to the Mobile Food Pantry Program (MFP). Data sources include client surveys, client focus groups, agency interviews, and administrative data. All survey results presented are weighted results. With the weighting, the findings are representative of the entire client base of all agencies selected for the sample.

SERVICES

The MFP distributions are like traveling farmers' markets that offer free food to people in need. Distributions provide a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, dry goods, and bakery items. However, the traditional walk-up format of distributions shifted to drive-through only due to the pandemic. The mobile pantries are hosted by churches, schools, and community centers, and each agency serves between 100 and 400 clients with the MFP.

The MFP program operates in 32 counties, across all five regions served by Feeding America West Michigan (FAWM):

- Rural Northwest
- Urban Southwest
- Urban West
- Rural West
- Rural Upper Peninsula

The program's reach is extensive. For example, in the first quarter of 2021, the 285 scheduled distributions served approximately 36,940 (duplicated) households, with approximately 1,847,000 pounds of produce.ⁱ Approximately 30-40 mobile pantries occur on most weeks. Mobile pantries account for approximately 40% of the food distributed by FAWM.

ABOUT THE CLIENTS

The survey data summarized here offer the first comprehensive baseline of the MFP client characteristics to date. Based on weighted survey results, the MFP client base is largely made up of older white women. The client base is estimated at 75% female, 84% white, and 10% Latino. The average age is 53 years. In terms of household composition:

- Approximately 18% of clients live alone; among those who do not live alone, 52% have children present.

- On average, 3.5 people live in the household at least 4 days out of the week.
- Where children are present, an average of 2.1 children (under age 18) live in the household.

Table 1. MFP Client Characteristics, 2021

Gender (n=602)	Percentage (%)	Standard Error
Female	75	-4
Male	24	-3
None of these	1	-1
Total	100	
Race (n=581)	Percentage (%)	Standard Error
White	84	3
Black or African American	5	2
Asian	2	1
American Indian or Alaska Native	4	1
Middle Eastern or North African	0	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0
Some other race or ethnicity	7	2
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin (n=602)	Percentage (%)	Standard Error
Yes	10	-3
No	90	-3
Total	100	
Combined Household Income in Past Month(n=509)	Percentage (%)	Standard Error
zero	5	-2
\$500 or less	8	-2
\$501–\$1,000	21	-3
\$1,001–\$2,000	39	-4
\$2,001–\$3,000	18	-2
\$3,001–\$4,000	4	-1
More than \$4,000	4	-1
Total	100	

There were few differences in client characteristics across regions, although it should be noted that most of the people of color in the study were from one of the five regions. Differences were more apparent when clustered by urbanicity. Clients in rural areas were older on average than those in urban areas (55.7 and 50.6, respectively), and more likely to be female, white, and non-Hispanic, than those in urban areas. Clients in the urban regions and people of color were much more likely to have children in the household compared to rural areas. Among clients who did not live alone:

- Slightly over one-third in rural areas compared to nearly two-thirds in urban areas reported there were children in the household.
- Nearly half of white non-Hispanic clients but about two-thirds of people of color had children in the household.

Among the seven *agencies interviewed*, none collected information from and about the MFP clients other than what is required when USDA’s The Emergency Food Assistance Program

(TEFAP) products are included as part of the distribution—which is often. Based on the TEFAP forms, agencies report to FAWM aggregate numbers of households, and individuals, children, seniors, and veterans in the households. One agency specified that they preferred to not ask any further questions of the clients to maximize their comfort level with the services. (“Many are hesitant to give us their real address.”)

At least four agencies made use of the FAWM data to identify trends in demand, plan future distributions, and identify the most vulnerable people in the community who are seeking services. They also communicated the number of people served to partners, membership, and internal outreach staff. One agency analyzed the zip code information and found that many people were coming from several locations that were quite far away.

THE NEED

The need within the client base served by FAWM is great. From the client survey and client focus group emerged these indicators of need:

- About 79% of the clients are food insecure.ⁱⁱ Clients in urban regions were more likely to be food insecure than rural clients (84% and 71%, respectively).
- Approximately 67% to 73% the clients live at or below the poverty line.ⁱⁱⁱ
- More than 90% of households have some source of monthly income. The most common sources is social security and/or a pension, received by over one-third, followed by a full-time job (25%) and disability income (23%).

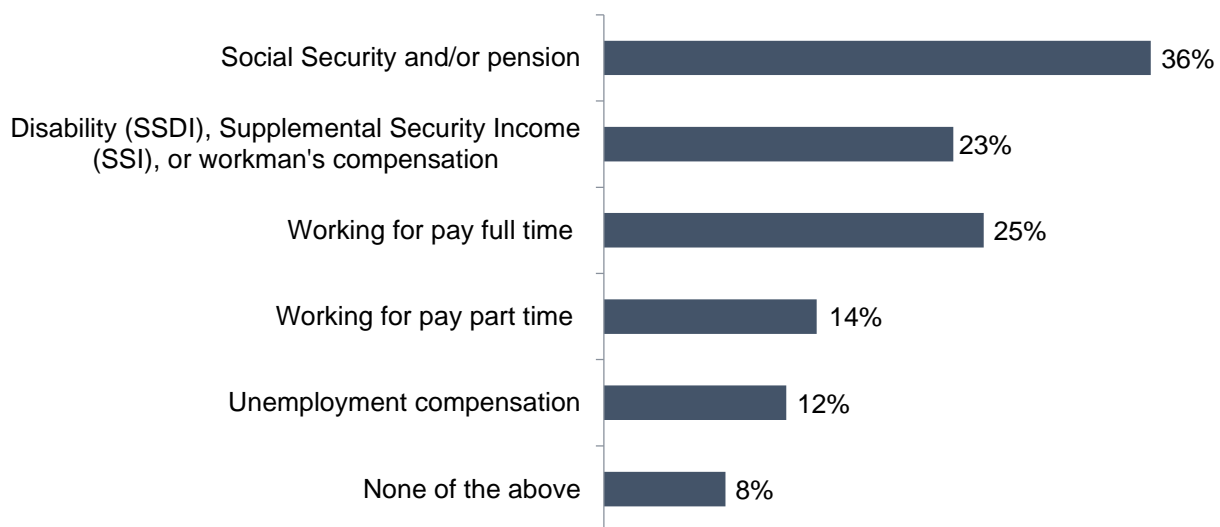


Figure 1. Sources of Income for Household in the Last Month

- About 49% reported that at least one member of their household has unpaid medical or hospital bills.
- More than half of clients cited having to choose between paying for transportation or food at least once a year. About half said they had to make these trade-off decisions at least once a

year for paying utilities, and at least 4 in 10 said the same about medicine or medical costs, and rent or mortgage.

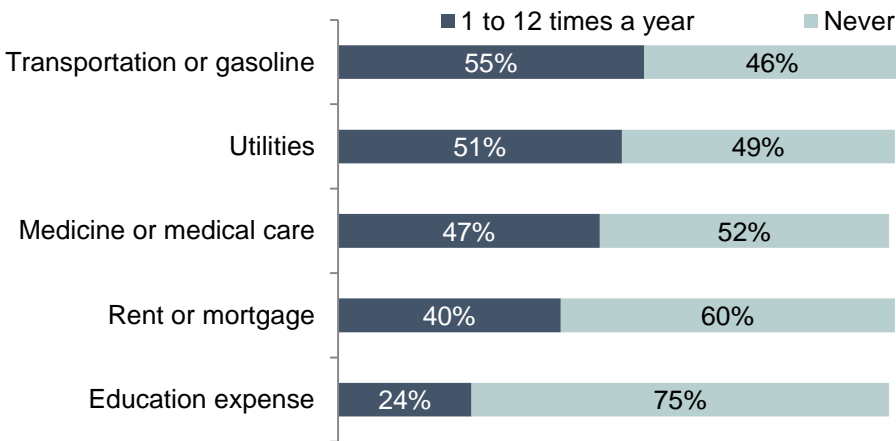


Figure 2. Economic Trade-Offs: How Often During the Past 12 Months Clients Had To Choose Between Paying for Food and Paying for Other Living Expenses

- Nearly two-thirds of the clients have one or more medical conditions that are related to diet. The incidence of preventable chronic disease included 22% with diabetes and 44% with high blood pressure.
- In terms of other life stressors, 18% of clients reported indications of depression.^{iv}

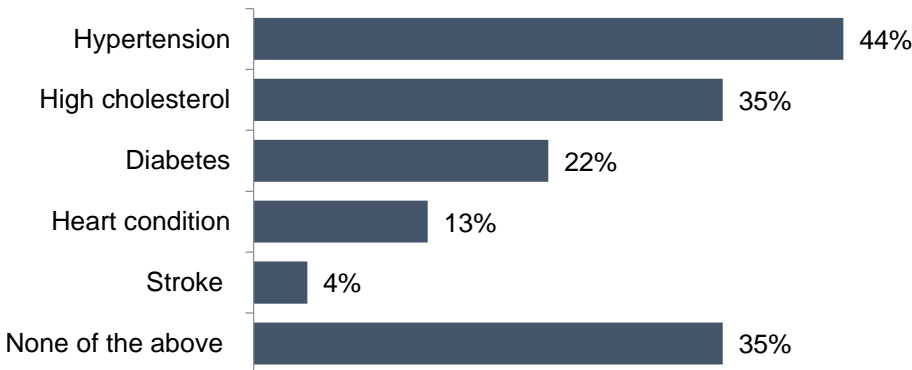


Figure 3. Health Professional Ever Told You That You Have Any of the Following Conditions

Income limitations drive the use of food distributions. The majority of *focus group participants* shared with the research team that having low income, being unemployed, or living on a fixed income or with a disability were the primary reasons they utilized a food distribution. They were also quick to acknowledge, however, the distributions as an affordable means to access healthy foods. Most discussed the income limits on their household grocery budgets in terms of having to forgo healthier, more expensive options in order to purchase staples and food that is cheaper and will last longer.

Participants valued the distributions as a source of support. Some examples given included reducing the monthly cost of groceries (one individual shared that they had spent \$0 on groceries in the last two months because of the food they received through the pantry) and off-setting the expense of other bills; providing fresh fruits and vegetables that wouldn't otherwise be accessible; and a safer, more convenient alternative to taking children through a store in the time of COVID. Several participants mentioned they specifically utilize the distributions because there are fresh vegetables available.

Focus group participants also mentioned having few other locations available for fresh healthy foods, but this was not a common reason cited for attending a mobile food distribution.

SUPPORTS ACCESSED

FAWM clients have used various strategies to get enough food to meet the needs of their household. The extent of self-reported use of SNAP, pantries, and friends and family are noted here.

- Approximately 27% of the client households currently received SNAP or food stamps. About 8 in 10 said that the SNAP benefits usually last two or three weeks (31% and 52%, respectively).
- On average, households received food from a pantry or grocery program in 6.2 of the past 12 months.
- Households received free groceries from a pantry, food bank, or church an average of 2.4 times in the past 30 days.
- About 22% of households had a member who received a free meal during the past 30 days.
- Nearly all clients undertook informal strategies to help bring enough food to their household. The most common, used by more than 6 in 10 clients, was buying the cheapest food available regardless of nutritional value. More than half received help from family and friends, or ate expired food.

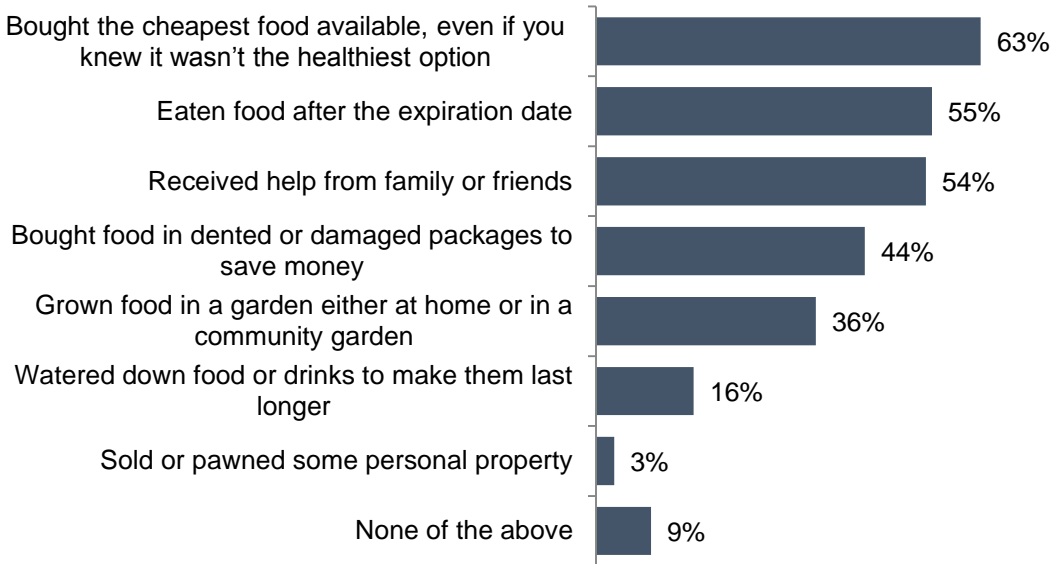


Figure 4. Household Strategies Used to Get Food in Last 12 Months

EASE OF ACCESS

Clients weighed in on the accessibility of the MFP they typically attended. MFPs appear to be convenient and accessible, with few challenges. However, about 1 in 5 found the wait time long once they arrived at the MFP distribution. Specifically:

- About 90% of clients rated the *location* of the Mobile Food Pantry as good or very good (28% and 62%, respectively)
- Twenty-one percent of clients said that the *wait time* at the Mobile Food Pantry was long or very long (17% and 4%, respectively), while 64% said it was fine and 13% said it was short.
- In terms of *travel*, it takes an average of 16 to 18 minutes to get to the Mobile Food Pantry (focus group profile response and survey response, respectively).
- A total of 87% of focus group participants (profile response) said it was very or somewhat *easy to get to* the Mobile Food Pantry (60% and 27%, respectively).

Focus group participants mostly reported no challenges accessing the distributions. For the few who did report challenges, there was little consistency in the types of challenges shared across focus groups. Multiple individuals participating in the Spanish-language focus group reported that it was difficult to attend distributions because they shared cars with a partner whose work hours overlapped with distribution hours. Not surprisingly, two people in one rural focus group noted the mobile food distribution was “convenient, but a bit of a drive.” One person reported that their health condition can sometimes prevent them from making it to a distribution. There seemed to be recognition by many *focus group participants* that transportation is a barrier for many of the people in their communities, and nearly every focus group talked about sharing rides or picking up boxes for family, friends, and neighbors who could not get to the distribution themselves.

OUTCOMES

The findings shared in this chapter relate to client experience and satisfaction with Mobile Food Pantry Program (MFP), value of supports, consumption of healthy food, and ability of agencies to meet needs of diverse clients. Findings are presented as headers; these definitive statements are followed by specific data points as evidence to support the finding. Data sources include client surveys, client focus groups, and agency interviews. All survey results presented are weighted results. With the weighting, the findings are representative of the entire client base of all agencies selected for the sample.

ACCESS AND CONSUMPTION OF HEALTHY FOOD

Clients understand the importance of healthy food, and they view the distributions as a primary source of affordable healthy foods. Increasing access to these types of foods and increasing the variety of foods that are shared with clients of the MFP will support further consumption of healthy foods within the communities served.

“Any time we can get unprocessed meats, unprocessed vegetables, whole fruits, potatoes. Anything unprocessed. We feel very good with sharing that with folks. Nutrition of those folks is a priority for us.” – MFP service agency

People Want To Eat Healthier and the Mobile Food Pantry Has a Positive Influence on Consumption

The survey and focus groups revealed a great deal of interest among MFP clients to include more fresh and healthy foods, especially fruits and vegetables, into their diets. The MFP is a key source for many households’ intake of these foods. Without it, these households would likely not have as many fruits or vegetables in their diets.

Evidence

Survey responses reveal that the vast majority of clients (90%) want to eat more fruits and vegetables, while about 9% feel they already eat enough fruits and vegetables.

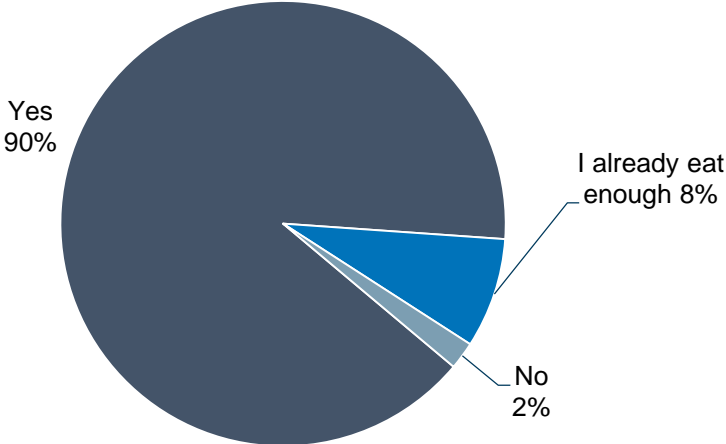


Figure 5. Level of Agreement with the Statement: I am interested in eating more fruits and vegetables (N=615)

The *survey* data also reveal that 54% get most or all of their fruits and vegetables from the MFP. Those in the urban areas tended to get the bulk of their fresh produce from the food distribution, compared to rural areas (not statistically significant but notable at 60% and 47%, respectively). The proportion that answered “all” or “most” ranged from 39% in rural Upper Peninsula to 69% in the urban southwest Lower Peninsula. The *focus group participants* [profile] also reported that most or some (43% in each category) of the fresh fruits and vegetables eaten by the household comes from the Mobile Food Pantry.

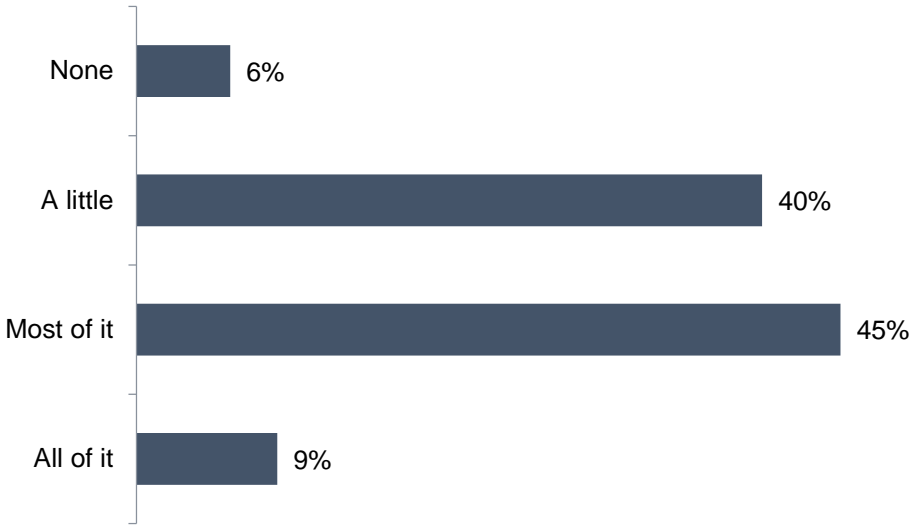


Figure 6. Of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetables You Eat, How Much Comes from Food Distribution? (N=597)

Clients recognize the role distributions play in the consumption of fruits and vegetables, with 91% affirming that they eat more fruit and vegetables because of the foods that are shared. The response was similar among *focus group participants*, with 80% indicating they eat more fresh fruit and vegetables because of the MFP. *Focus group participants* suggested this was often because the cost of fresh and healthy options was prohibitive of their household food budget.

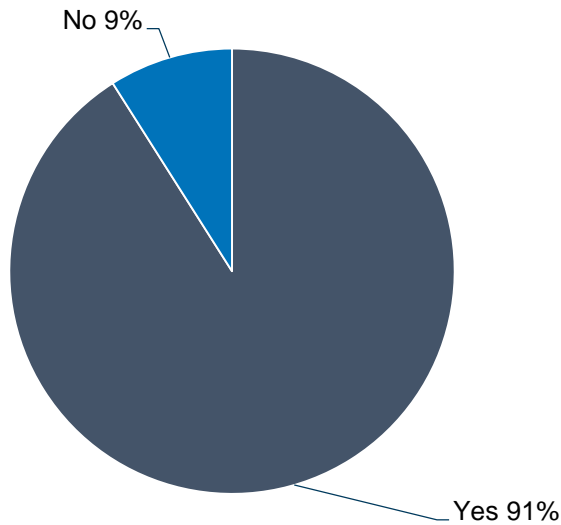


Figure 7. This Mobile Food Pantry Has Helped Me Eat More Fruits and Vegetables (n=585)

Cost and Availability Are the Primary Barriers to Eating More Fruits and Vegetables

The MFP distribution appears to be an ideal resource for the clients, as the food shared addresses key concerns with cost and availability of fresh healthy food.

Evidence

Survey data show that over two-thirds of respondents believe they would eat more fruits and vegetables if they cost less and almost half would eat more if they were more available at the MFP. Other common strategies include having easier access to fruits and vegetables and knowledge of proper storage procedures.

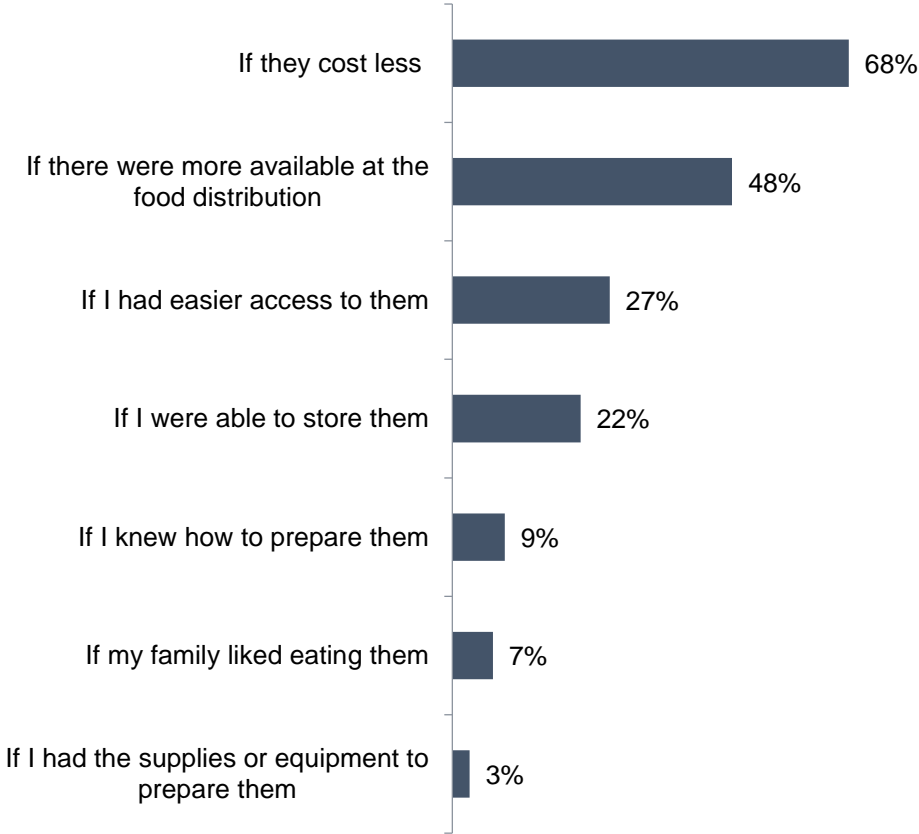


Figure 8. What would help you eat or serve more fresh fruits and vegetables? (n=550)

Focus group participants shared that the most common way MFP has influenced dietary behavior is by expanding the variety of healthy foods—particularly fruits and vegetables—that individuals and their families consume. Participants also noted MFPs’ influence on increasing

their propensity for trying new foods and finding new ways of preparing familiar foods (particularly when they get an excess of any one item).

SATISFACTION WITH MOBILE PANTRY

Food preference was more opaque in 2020 because of the drive-up distribution model. Agencies shared that clients' food preference was more obvious when it was a walk-up, because what was less desirable was left behind. Nonetheless, data gathered through the survey, focus groups, and agency interviews provide some insight into consumer preferences, what they would like to see more of, and what types of products are least desired.

Clients Desire a Diversity of Products

Clients enjoy receiving different types of fruits and vegetables, but also meat, or other sources of protein, as well as dairy products at distributions.

Evidence

The *survey respondents* indicated that fruits and vegetables were the foods they were *most eager* to get from the MFP, with 81% of respondents selecting these foods. Protein was also high on the list of items, followed by dairy products (78% and 69%, respectively).

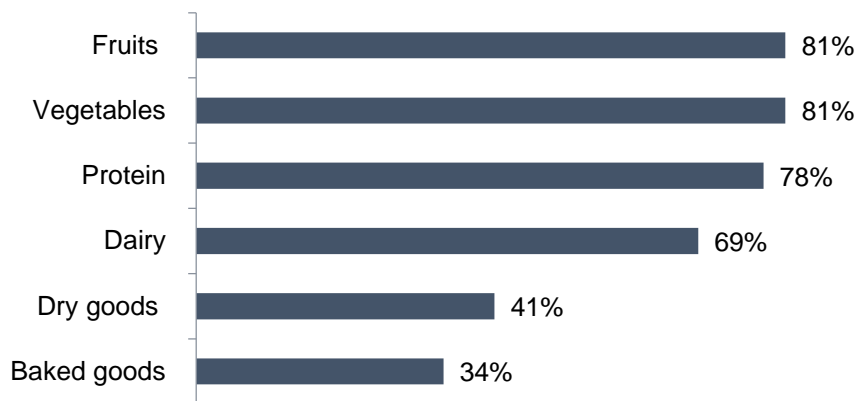


Figure 9. What types of products are you most eager to get? (n=566)

Focus group participants primarily favored items that could be used in multiple dishes and prepared in different ways. When pressed about favorites:

- Meat and potatoes were the most frequently mentioned.
- Yogurt, carrots, onions, cheese, apples, and canned goods all were mentioned more than once across the six focus groups.
- Other items that participants listed as their favorites to receive included eggs, flour tortillas, peppers, garlic, squash, cabbage, rice, and milk.

- Canned chicken and canned mushrooms were also discussed as valued, but uncommon to receive.
- Meat, peanut butter, canned goods, lettuce, and most fruits other than apples were desired but rarely received at distributions.

When asked what foods they **would like to see more of**, the most frequent response was “meat” and many participants added that this could be satisfied by alternative protein sources such as peanut butter or beans. Participants also expressed a desire for:

- More variety of foods in general.
- Fruit—not just apples (Spanish-language group), watermelon, strawberries, peaches, grapes, raspberries, blueberries, pears, citrus fruit, bananas, and lemons.
- Vegetables: corns, peas, carrots, beans, lettuce cabbage, greens, broccoli, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, mushrooms, garlic, celery, onions, Brussel sprouts, and asparagus.
- Foods that can be stored: dried pasta, peanut butter, rice, corn flour, lentils, canned goods, and dried beans
- Additional items like fresh herbs, butter, bread, and seasonings.

Asked what food items were most **desirable** to their clients, *most agencies* (n=5) tended to list a diversity of items, most often including meat, milk, and produce. There was one mention of just meat, and another just specified fruits and vegetables. Three agencies mentioned that favorites include items that clients deem expensive (meats, produce) to purchase on their own.

According to agencies, the items deemed most favored by clients that are *rarely available* included: meat (beef, rib, frozen skinless chicken breast, chicken, turkey) (5 mentions); fresh fruits and vegetables (more variety of fruit, seasonal produce, watermelon) (4 mentions); milk (2 mentions); and rice and bread (for Latinx clients) and bakery items (2 mentions).

Agencies also weighed in on what *they* would like to see more of for their clients. The most common response was meats (5 mentions including unprocessed meats, prepared bags of chicken nuggets, and taco meat). Other requests were:

- Fruits (e.g., bananas) and vegetables
- Dairy products
- Anything unprocessed
- Cakes
- For Latinx clients: Tortillas, taco meat, rice
- Dry goods (shelf stable) such as peanut butter and oatmeal
- Fruit juices

Baked Goods Are Not Highly Valued

Clients are grateful for the food received, but identified baked goods, sweets, and pastries as not particularly desirable foods.

Evidence

About half of respondents pointed to baked goods as the products most likely to go to waste. About one quarter of individuals responded that vegetables were the most likely to be wasted, and sources of protein were identified as the least likely to go to waste, with only 3 in 100 selecting this type of product.

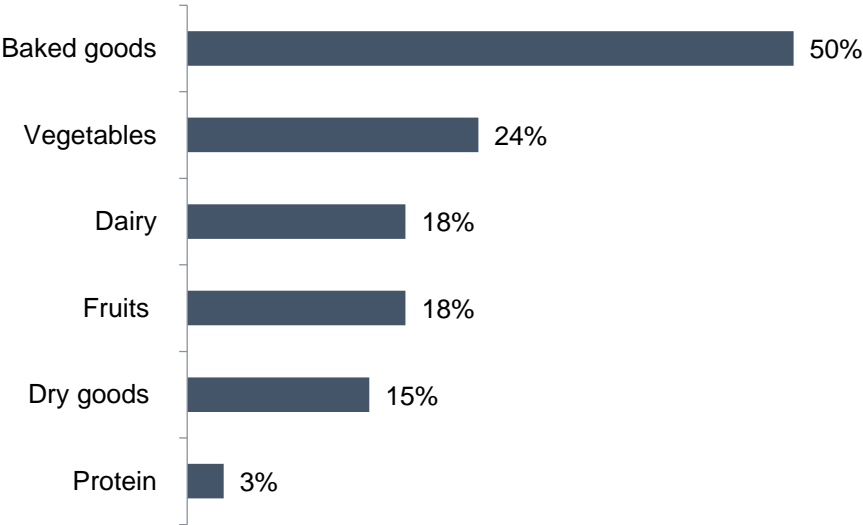


Figure 10. What types of products are most likely to go to waste? (n=439)

Focus group results echoed the survey findings, with sweets and bakery goods being disfavored. They also noted that these were the most likely to be received at expiration date or to spoil in short order. Participants’ least favorite thing was any great volume of one type of food. The Spanish-language *focus group participants* expressed a desire for fewer canned goods. For example, the group considered canned baked beans excessively sweet, were unfamiliar with their use in cooking, and desired dried beans instead.

When asked about *least favorite foods*, agencies interviewed shared the following:

- At least four agencies mentioned that people are grateful for the food, and do not complain about what they receive.
- In terms of specific items, least favored were pork patties or any processed meat from the USDA, as well as baked goods (susceptible to mold), plantains, and coleslaw mix.
- At least three agencies noted (that in the past, not recently) there is sometimes too great a volume of one food item, and that is difficult for clients.
- At least four agencies mentioned that food that was unfamiliar was not favored by clients.

Consumers Enjoy and Use the Fruits and Vegetables Shared With Them

There was a high degree of satisfaction with the MFP products overall and the quality of the food, and a majority of consumers reported that they are able to use whatever items they receive. In addition, there is enthusiasm for trying new fruits and vegetables.

Evidence

Data from the *survey* demonstrate that three quarters or more of respondents like the fruits and vegetables they receive, are familiar with these foods, and use what is shared with them. More than 7 in 10 said that they enjoy trying new fruits and vegetables from the MFP. About 6 in 10 thought the foods looked fresh and were satisfied with the amount of fruits and vegetables received. In terms of food quality, there were few instances cited by *focus group participants* where food received was substandard—e.g., milk or other dairy products at expiration or moldy bakery products.

Table 2. Client Perceptions of Fresh Produce at MFP (n=615)

Statement	% Agree or Strongly Agree
I like most of the fruits and vegetables.	86%
The fruits and vegetables are ones that I am used to eating.	78%
I use all the fruits and vegetables.	75%
I enjoy trying new fruits and vegetables from this Mobile Food Pantry.	72%
The fruits and vegetables look fresh.	64%
I am satisfied with the amount of fruits and vegetables I am able to get.	59%

Clients Find a Way to Use Almost All of What Is Shared With Them

Those who receive food through the MFP appear to place a high value on reducing food waste and making use of any and all items they are provided. They make the best use of what they get through a number of different means including trying new dishes, sharing or trading food items, canning, or freezing.

Evidence

Survey respondents, for the most part, agreed that sharing, trading, or giving away excess food received at the distribution was not uncommon. Almost 4 in 10 respondents said that some of the fruits and vegetables spoil before they are able to use them, but 14% felt they did not have the time, knowledge, or equipment to prepare the fruits and vegetables that were shared.

“You can pretty much use everything in something.” – Client in Focus Group

“People figure out how to use what is in there.” – MFP service agency

Table 3. Client Feedback on the Use of Fresh Produce from MFP (n=615)

Statement	% Agree or Strongly Agree
Some fruits and vegetables go bad before I use them.	37%
I trade or give away some fruits or vegetables.	32%
Not sure how to prepare some of the fruits and vegetables.	14%
Do not have time to prepare some of the fruits and vegetables.	14%
Do not have the right equipment (stove, refrigerator, pots and pans, etc.)	14%

MEETING NEEDS OF DIVERSE CLIENTS

Like the community at large, pantry clients present a range of dietary needs and constraints, and cultural traditions around food. It is a challenge to meet the dietary needs of a diverse population. The research found that MFP is mostly meeting the needs of its clientele, yet paying attention to household composition and cultural nuance continue to be worthy to focus on when engaging and sustaining communities.

Household Composition Matters

In terms of meeting the needs of a diversity of households, agencies pointed to differences based on household composition, i.e., size of household and age of household members, or even if someone was properly housed.

Evidence

Agencies gave examples of how household composition relates to the ability to meet client nutrition needs. Three agencies commented that households get the same amount of food, regardless of household size. Two agencies noted that age makes a difference with regard to nutritional needs. For example, seniors may be more pressed to fully utilize a large volume of a single item, and households with children will especially appreciate milk. For a person who is homeless, shelf stable food may be more useful than perishable food. There was not one specific solution offered to this diversity of needs, but rather, each setting and household simply make the best accommodation they can. It is very common for one family to pick up boxes for other families, food is shared or traded, and people make the best of the food available.

“Right now a couple get the same as a family of six” –MFP service agency

With few exceptions, *focus group participants* felt that distributions met their expectations and the food mostly fit with each person’s individual household needs. When opinions diverged, it was largely due to a difference in family size (either they received too much or too little of a particular food item) or it was related to a desire for more variety in the foods received from distribution to distribution.

Cultural Differences Matter in Meeting Needs

Agencies reported that cultural differences (race/ethnicity) are relevant to how well the food provided meets the needs of the entire community. Agencies also talked about the importance of client trust in the organizations that do the distributions, which is particularly salient when serving a diverse client base.

Evidence

Cultural differences matter because many of the agencies are serving diverse populations. To put agency interview results in context:

- Two of the three *urban* agencies interviewed served a client base largely made up of historically disadvantaged groups—Latinx and Black, although these groups were not the majority of those in poverty locally.
- In communities served by *rural* agencies, those in poverty were largely white. The client base of most of these agencies was also predominantly white, but one estimated that 40% of their client base was Native American.

Table 4. Client Characteristics Among Interviewed Agencies

Host Agency Area	Overrepresentation in Services Relative to Those in Poverty	Poverty in Community	Client Base
Urban	Latinx	14% Latinx	85%-90% Latinx
Urban	Black and Latinx	14% Latinx; 20% Black	30% Latinx; 25% Black
Urban	White	54% white	80% white
Rural	None	96% white	Predominantly white
Rural	White	85% white	96% white
Rural	None	94% white	Predominantly white
Rural	Native American	13% Native American	40% Native American

Four agencies highlighted cultural differences (race/ethnicity) that matter in providing food that meets client needs.

- Two of these specified that to the extent that whole foods are available, both Native American and Latinx families’ needs can be met.
- Others referenced the foods that have been provided that are unfamiliar or not typically used by, for example, Native Americans (mushrooms), Latinx (cottage cheese), or African Americans (asparagus or squash).
- Another noted that their rural client base is interested in meat and potatoes.

To better meet the needs of BIPOC clients, agencies suggested that the MFP should:

- Include a greater variety of products (1 mention).
- Share information in non-English languages (mentioned: Spanish, [African] Kinyarwanda, and Vietnamese) (2 mentions).
- Bring trucks into more remote areas (e.g., Baldwin) to help underserved minorities (1 mention).
- Be conducted by trusted agencies (at least 3 mentions).

“When trusted organizations do the distributions, they reach more of the vulnerable people. Trust matters.” – MFP service agency

A small number of focus group participants reported having dietary restrictions and said the distributions fit with their needs, but also noted that having a wide variety of foods to choose from helps them stay within those restrictions. Most of the focus group participants reported that the food shared was culturally appropriate. However, the Spanish-speaking focus group shared that tomatoes and dried beans would be more relevant to their traditional dishes than potatoes, and also expressed a desire for bags of corn masa as a key shelf-stable ingredient in many dishes. Similarly, 17% of survey respondents indicated that they could not eat some of the fruits and vegetables due to dietary restrictions, and 5% could not eat some fruits or vegetables due to religious or cultural reasons.

The agencies that mentioned some level of culturally specific mismatch of items to the audience also noted that preparation tips and suggestions helped improve the client eagerness to use the item.

“It would help to add recipes with some of the new items. They need to know what to do with them.” – MFP service agency

EXPERIENCE OF MOBILE FOOD PANTRY

Much like organizations in any sector, food distribution sites strive to engender a positive experience for their clients, recognizing that happy customers are repeat customers. At the same time, the need for emergency food can be humbling to those who are experiencing poverty or hunger—chronically or for the first time—and at times confusing to those born outside the United States. MFP host sites are very oriented to serving any people in need in their community and do their best to be welcoming to all.

The Client Experience Is Very Positive

The clients expressed a great deal of gratitude for the volunteers as well as the food. They gave high ratings on their overall experience with the MFP and described engagements that were friendly, welcoming, and supportive.

Evidence

Nearly all *survey respondents* rated their overall experience with the MFP as “very good” or “good.” There were no negative ratings.

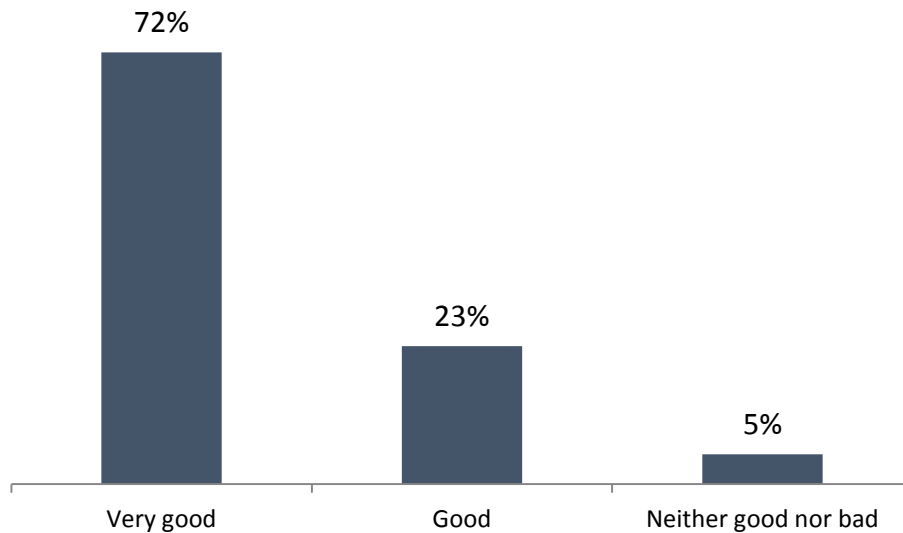


Figure 11. How would you rate your overall experience at this Mobile Food Pantry? (n=626)

When asked to rate the likelihood of recommending the MFP to a friend or a family member, 88% rated the likelihood as a 9 or 10 (10 being extremely likely).

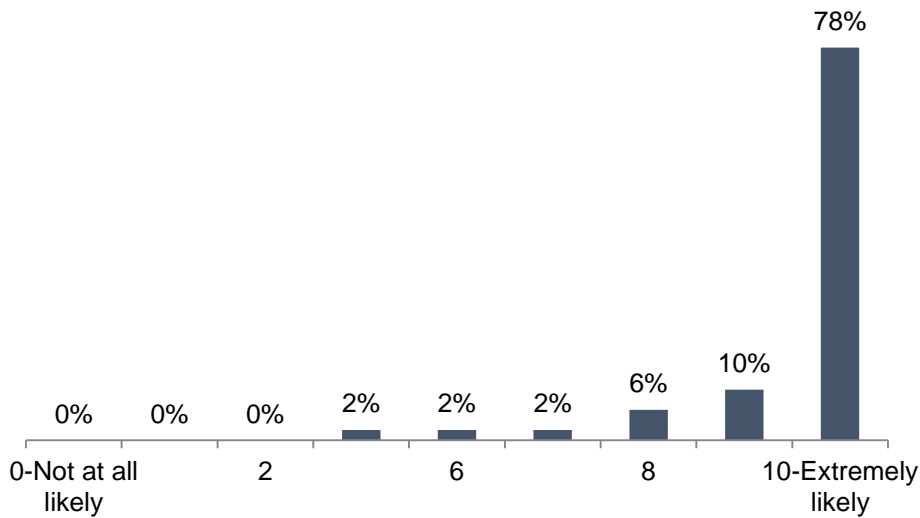


Figure 12. How likely are you to recommend this Mobile Food Pantry to a friend or family member? (n=615)

Further evidence provided through the *survey* response is that virtually all of the respondents (99%) indicated they were treated “well” or “very well” when they visited the MFP. There were no negative responses. The proportion that selected “very well” ranged from 79% (rural northwest Lower Peninsula) to 99% (urban southwest Lower Peninsula) across the five regions.

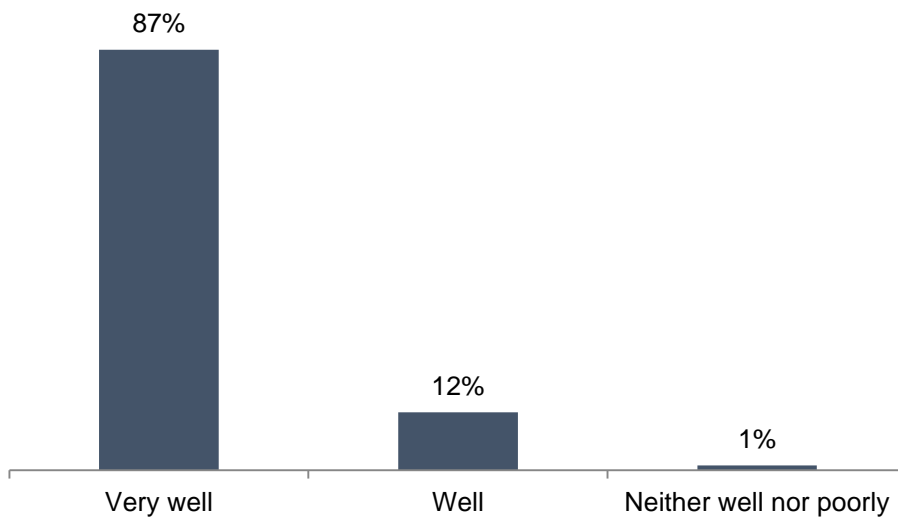


Figure 13. How are you treated when you visit this Mobile Food Pantry? (n=617)

All of the *focus group participants* talked about how they were treated with kindness and respect at the mobile food pantry and expressed a great deal of gratitude for their caring and dedication. The *focus group participants* also made a point of recognizing the hard work and hustle that the volunteers put in to make the distributions function smoothly. Participants found

the “greeter” or an individual that engages in friendly discussion and makes them feel comfortable and not “as a beggar,” is a valued aspect of the distributions.

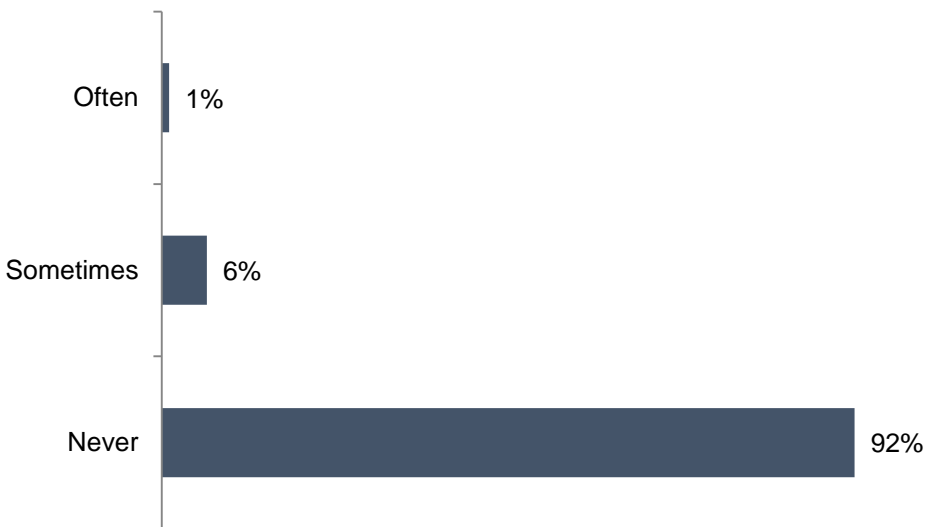


Figure 14. Have you had difficulty getting services at this Mobile Food Pantry because you have had trouble communicating with staff or volunteers? (n=597)

OPERATIONAL CONCERNS RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC

The shifting conditions under which sites have operated—or paused, added, or cut back on distributions due to the pandemic—have of course necessitated many adjustments for host sites and for Feeding American West Michigan (FAWM) operations. It appears that there are pros and cons to both the old ways and the new ways. When and if conditions make it feasible to return to old ways, it is likely that some sites (and clients) will not be eager to do so.

“We want to move back to the self-select model where people can pick what will work for the family. It reduces waste and gives people agency in the process—both culturally and demographically.” – MFP service agency

Client Choice and Prepackaged Boxes Are Salient Issues to the Host Agencies

The prepackaged boxes add efficiency to distribution, but not knowing what is in the box can be a challenge. As agencies contemplate various scenarios for delivering emergency food, the availability of volunteers is a central concern.

Evidence

Unprompted, the majority (at least five) *agencies* commented on the shift in the delivery model due to the pandemic, from a walk-up, client-choice approach to a drive-up for a prepackaged box. One agency commented on client choice as the more enjoyable model, another looked forward to going back to that model, and yet another could not envision going back to the walk-up model.

In terms of the more distanced nature of distributions, some *focus group participants* expressed a preference for the current drive-through arrangement necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, saying it felt safe, and was “smoother and faster” than it was before.

Aside from products, agencies spontaneously commented on the delivery process. Two mentioned that the household-ready boxes prepackaged in the warehouse make distribution extremely easy. At least two noted that it is challenging not knowing in advance what will be delivered or how it will be packaged, although one said that was not as prevalent today as in the past. One of these further specified the challenge of a mismatch in the number of food boxes and gallons of milk (or meat).

“What makes it hard for us is we don’t know what we are getting, if they are coming in boxes, or if we need to get help to put it all in boxes. We don’t know how many volunteers we are going to have and it takes a lot of hands to do it. Could be a hard day. When it comes boxed up, we are so happy” – MFP service agency.

VALUE OF SUPPORTS

Research suggests that the value and utilization of the food can be increased by the provision of nutrition education and other supports for healthy eating. The willingness and capacity of sites to engage with another layer of programming at distributions is a critical factor in determining next steps. Preliminary evidence is positive, and further assessment is warranted to identify the potential opportunities for cost-effective and culturally appropriate products or supports at food distributions.

Agencies Were Tentatively Open to Providing Nutrition and Healthy-Eating Education

Agencies that were interviewed had no experience with nutrition-education programming attached to distributions. The agencies were experienced at outreach and are well-positioned as trusted agencies to do more of this. A number of issues would need to be addressed before this would be viable, such as waiting until walk-up distributions are possible and finding partners.

It would be very feasible for them to do outreach using flyers at this time. This could be implemented immediately if the flyers were generated by FAWM.

Evidence

None of the seven agencies interviewed provided regular nutrition-education programming alongside their MFP distributions. However, two did use flyers to reach people with relevant food resources. One of these routinely used flyers to promote their existing nutrition-education programming within the agency. The other would periodically distribute food-related information (e.g., healthy eating habits, cooking classes, pantry lists). Other agencies mentioned providing FAWM activity kits; non-food items (e.g., masks, library promotion); other food and non-food services; and informally discussing food ideas for items that were unfamiliar.

Despite a historical lack of educational programming, the agencies expressed an open mind to conducting education in the future (5 mentions).

- Providing regular education programming alongside their MFP distributions was not feasible given the current conditions with the pandemic (4 mentions).
- Agencies did not have a clear vision for how this could be managed, and were interested in learning more.
- Agencies could easily manage the use of handouts, especially if they were generated by FAWM, and these were deemed viable in the drive-up scenario.
- Education would be facilitated by advance notice of the truck contents, and by offering materials in multiple languages.

“[Sharing information on other programming is helpful] for the minority populations. . . . As long as our agency is distributing information, it is well received. Don’t know how it would be received without that already established relationship.” – MFP service agency

Recipes and Nutritional Information Are Perceived as Valuable and Useful by Clients

Clients reported limited exposure to information dissemination at distributions, but were positive in instances when it had been given. When provided, the information was easy to access, although there is a need for sharing in multiple languages. Receiving recipe cards or suggestions is a useful tactic to positively influence consumption of healthy foods.

Evidence

The provision of information on nutrition or healthy food does not appear to be widespread. A total of 40% of *survey respondents* reported having received recipes, nutrition education, or taste tests from an MFP site.

Of those that did receive these items, 94% found the information easy to understand and 73% reported that they learned something new. The *Spanish-language focus group* noted that they sometimes did not use recipe cards because it was difficult to understand the English words. At the same time, 83% of *survey respondents* that had received recipes or nutritional information indicated that they actually used what was shared.

Table 5. Percentage of Survey Respondents Agreeing with Statements About Receiving Recipes, Nutrition Education, or Taste Tests

Statement	% Agree or Strongly Agree
The information was easy to understand. (n=201)	94%
I used the information that was shared. (n=193)	83%
I learned something new. (n=191)	73%

“Well, yes, recipes have been useful to me, because sometimes we don’t even know what to cook.” —Client in Focus Group

Most of the *focus group participants* reported not receiving any recipe cards, but thought that receiving recipes that aligned with the foods given would be ideal. In each group, participants noted that recipes or preparation instructions would be particularly welcome for the more unique foods they receive. Also desired are food storage instructions and tips, such as how to freeze cheese or store potatoes. One group noted value in receiving the distribution schedules in advance, which allowed them to coordinate transportation or pick-ups with others. Another group imagined a situation where the items that would be received at the distribution were known in advance and consumers could gather and disseminate cooking and storage suggestions amongst each other.

LESSONS

Use of Data. *The study provides the first set of comprehensive data on client characteristics across all five regions.* These data can be a new lens for gauging and shaping potential program changes, and for sharing information about the client base internally and externally.

There is still a great need to better understand the client makeup at local sites. Agencies may benefit from coaching about how make the best use of the limited data available, or envisioning what other data would be most useful. For instance, a GIS analysis of client zip codes could provide a better understanding of the range of localities or distances traveled by clients. Such information may illuminate service gaps for diverse populations (e.g., tribal communities) or geographic gaps and need for additional host sites.

Program Value. *The Mobile Food Pantry Program (MFP) improves access to healthy food, for a client base that is overwhelmingly food insecure, and the majority of whom have preventable chronic disease associated with diet.* MFP is serving a critical need for people and families in poverty or with significant financial struggles despite having some monthly income. The clients are resourceful in obtaining food for their household. They are able to access emergency food, government support, and informal support, yet less than 1 in 3 households receive SNAP benefits.

Products. *There is a clear interest and value in ensuring consistent delivery of a variety of food groups (produce, protein, dairy), more seasonal products, and more variety in fruits and vegetables.* Ideally, there would remain a strong emphasis on fruits and vegetables, as this is responsive to expressed needs and clients' various food restrictions, and enables a nutrient-dense and varied diet.

Access to Healthy Food. *The MFP is a key resource for people in need or who are struggling to make ends meet, to gain much needed access to fresh, healthy food.* This is reflected in the proportion of fresh fruit and vegetables consumed that comes from the food distribution, interest in eating more produce, and direct attribution to MFP as aiding clients to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Meeting Needs. *Cultural differences matter because some of the agencies are serving diverse populations.* Responding to the interests and needs expressed overall—for a good variety of fresh product, storage tips, product information, and preparation tips, especially for less familiar products—is responsive to *both* the broad needs of the clientele as a whole and specific needs of BIPOC clients. In addition, the needs of BIPOC clients are well served by alertness to language needs and familiar and traditional foods (e.g., fresh produce, dry beans).

Education. There is no history of nutrition education programming attached to distributions. *Agencies that were interviewed had no experience with this, but were open to hearing ideas from Feeding America West Michigan (FAWM) on how this could be accomplished.* The best-

positioned agencies would be those who are trusted in the community, experienced at outreach, and interested in expanding their services. Bringing in full-scale programming would of course not be a simple undertaking for FAWM, potentially requiring creative and dedicated staff time to work out objectives, logistics, relationships, and material resources. But in the immediate future, local sites could feasibly do outreach with flyers generated by FAWM. The most immediate interest is to provide information matched to the food products delivered that day.

Host sites. Although it was not a planned target of the research, the issue of trust in host agencies came up organically. Ideally, host sites should be well-positioned in the community. To the extent that hosts have capacity to provide access to other services (e.g., enrollment in SNAP, garden access, food preservation), then client access to economic and healthy eating support services could be expanded.

Distribution Models and the Future. The mode of distribution was also not a planned topic, but the theme emerged in relation to client choice. There are clear advantages to the relative safety of a drive-up model, and agencies lauded the ease of having individually prepackaged boxes for each family as was common practice in 2020. However, walk-ups are clearly superior for making personal connections, allowing client choice of foods, and providing nutrition or cooking education.

In the coming months, both FAWM and local host sites are likely to face emerging questions, challenges, and opportunities around managing operations and meeting needs. In the current dynamic environment, the organizations may need to deal with questions, such as the following:

- If the pandemic situation allows for walk-ups, how many agencies will prefer to remain in the drive-up distribution model? And how readily can a diversity of distribution models be accommodated across the program?
- What infrastructure, resources, and capacity are needed to help FAWM and the hosts remain flexible in their operations, and adjust distributions in response to rapid environmental changes?
- Do the criteria for providing prepackaged family boxes from the warehouse need to change? Can truck contents be more closely tailored for sites with a large proportion of Latinx clients? What would make it more feasible to consistently provide a wider variety of fresh produce in all deliveries?

Questions related to nutrition or healthy eating education and client choice are particularly salient to MFP, such as:

- What are creative ways to promote client choice during a drive-up pandemic environment?
- What are the most impactful educational opportunities for sites that must or want to remain in the drive-up model? Can education be safely conducted aside from outreach with handouts? What more extensive or intensive educational opportunities can be opened up where walk-ups are feasible?
- What would make it possible to provide sites with advance knowledge of the truck delivery contents?

- What time and material resources should or can be committed to educational programming? What partnerships can be forged to provide educational programming alongside MFP distributions? What is the right role for FAWM? What are relevant criteria for identifying sites that are appropriate to pilot efforts?

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

METHODS

Client Focus Groups

The evaluation team conducted six focus groups online via the Zoom platform. Two were made up of rural clients, two of urban clients (including one conducted in Spanish by a native Spanish speaker) and two were mixed.

Recruitment was carried out through distribution of paper flyers by Mobile Food Pantry (MFP) sites; this process is described in detail in the “Dissemination” section below.

Clients interested in participating in a focus group used a link or QR code to access a SurveyMonkey poll where they filled out their contact information. Once PPA received the contact information, they sent each client an email thanking them for their interest. Clients were randomly selected, and then organized into groups based on urbanicity. Selected clients were sent an email appointment requesting confirmation of their availability on the date and time provided, and follow-up calls were placed to all selected clients who did not immediately respond. If clients were unavailable or no response was received, the research team moved on to the next selected client on the list. Once a client was confirmed to participate, they were sent an email with Zoom login and call-in information. The day before each focus group, all clients received reminder calls. After the focus groups, each participating client received a \$40 gift card.

All of the focus groups were recorded, and a staff researcher took notes in real time. Following the groups, the recordings were used to clean the notes. The notes from the Spanish-language focus group were translated to English. Finally, the notes were coded in NVIVO, a software platform for qualitative data analysis, to identify salient themes across the focus groups.

Based on a very brief “profile” form completed by 30 of 34 focus group participants: average household sizes were on average two adults and one youth. About 83% of participants reported that they typically attended MFP about once a month (n=18) or twice a month (n=7), with the remainder stating visits were typically three or four times a month. The individuals predominantly identified as white (83%) and included five (17%) Native Americans and four (13%) Latinx. However, it should be noted that four of the six participants in the Spanish-speaking group did not complete a profile from which these numbers originate, and if those missing had identified as Latinx, the proportion could have been as high as 24%.

Client Survey

The MFP client survey that was disseminated was a modified version of the *Feeding America Client Survey* (FACS). The FACS was modified to be self-administered, to include new

questions, so that the informed-consent language reflected the idea that postal information will be required at the end to ensure that incentives can be mailed out, and to bring down the reading level. The survey included 63 questions, and the estimated completion time was 15 to 20 minutes. The survey was available in English and Spanish.

Dissemination

When: The survey was disseminated at distributions between February 2 and March 25, 2021.

Where: The survey was disseminated by 31 agencies across 32 MFP distributions in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.^v The number of agencies that distributed the flyer per region were:

- Rural Northwest: 5
- Urban Southwest: 3
- Urban West: 14
- Rural West: 5
- Rural Upper Peninsula: 4

To Whom: Agencies were asked to hand out a flyer to everyone who attended a selected distribution. The flyer invited the client to participate in an online survey and to register their interest in online focus groups. Clients were eligible to respond to the survey if they had attended a Mobile Food Pantry program in the past. Responses were limited to one person per household. Participants who completed the entire survey and submitted their address were sent \$25 gift cards. Respondents who did not substantively answer at least 50% of the questions did not receive an incentive.

Mode: Respondents were provided a QR code and hyperlink to access the survey. Respondents had the option of taking the survey on their smartphone, computer, or tablet. Agencies were encouraged to hand the flyers out directly to clients as soon as they got in line for the distribution or as soon as there was a person available to hand out the flyers (it is not uncommon for clients to arrive at a distribution before staff/volunteers). Most agencies agreed to hand out the flyers directly to clients. At least two agencies disseminated the flyers by putting them in the food boxes that the clients received.

Completions and Response Rates

Completions and response rates were calculated overall and by region. A response was considered complete if the respondent answered all of the required survey questions, whether or not they answered the personal information to send the incentive. Response rates included completions and any partial responses.

When calculating completions and response rates, the following respondents were excluded:

- Ineligible respondents (i.e., duplicate household responses, people who did not consent to take the survey, or those for which it was their first time attending an MFP).

- Respondents who answered more than 50% of the questions as “do not know” or “prefer not to answer.”
- Respondents who progressed through less than 50% of the survey (i.e., quit taking the survey less than halfway through)

Table 6. Response Rates by Region

Region	Number of Survey Responses	Number of Households*	Response Rate
Urban LP-Southwest	45	300	15%
Urban LP-West	229	1,800	13%
Rural LP-Northwest	54	700	8%
Rural LP-West	87	650	13%
Rural UP	229	1,200	19%
Total	644	4,650	14%

* One agency distributed remaining flyers at a second distribution. The second distribution was not included in the calculation of the number of households served because the agency only received flyers for the anticipated attendance at one distribution.

Ineligible and Removals

Sixty-three people attempted to take the survey but were not eligible due to it being their first time visiting a mobile food pantry. An additional 17 people answered the survey but their responses were removed from all analyses because their address indicated that they were duplicate household responses. An additional three people were removed because they answered the first question but then did not consent to take the survey (question 2).

In order to maximize the data available for the analysis, two pools of respondents were used depending on the variable being analyzed. This process is further explained below in the “Weighting” section. In order to be included in the demographic analysis, respondents had to substantively answer all six demographic questions on age, race, ethnicity, zip code, and gender. In other words, these questions could not have been left blank or answered “prefer not to answer.” One hundred and three respondents were removed from the demographic analyses for not having substantively answered all of the demographic questions, resulting in a final pool for the demographic analysis of 602 respondents.

In order to be included in all of the other analyses (i.e., non-demographic), respondents had to have progressed through at least 50% of the survey and answered 50% or less of the questions as “do not know” or “prefer not to answer.” Sixty one people were removed for not meeting the prior requirements, for a final pool of 644 respondents.

Sampling

The client survey sampling was based on a one-stage cluster sampling. We took a random sample of agencies and then a distribution from each selected agency. In order to be included in the sample pool, an agency had to have a distribution scheduled during the study period

(between January 25 and the end of March). The Hispanic Center of West Michigan was included from the outset in order to ensure a sizable number of Spanish-speaking respondents.

Response rates by region were assessed during the study and the sample was adjusted in order to meet our targets on the total number of respondents (600) and adequate numbers of respondents across the five regions (Rural Northwest; Urban Southwest; Urban West; Rural West; and Rural Upper Peninsula). In practice, this resulted in adding some larger distributions and then ultimately removing a few distributions from our sample at the end of the study period. Distributions were selected or removed from the sample based on size and region.

Weighting

The survey respondent cases were weighted by agency in order for the responses to represent the entire pool of clients at the 31 selected agencies. In other words, those being served by a particular agency who responded to the survey represented the total number of the households (as anticipated for any given MFP distribution) served by MFP for that particular agency. The calculation:

- The denominator for an individual's weight was the total number of households served across the 31 agencies.
- The numerator for an individual's weight was calculated as the outcome of:
 - Numerator: the number of households served by the agency as portion of the total sample [i.e., number of households served across all agencies].
 - Denominator: total number of survey respondents in the agency

Each individual respondent within a given agency then had the same weight. The responses were then re-scaled to equal the total number of actual respondents to the survey.

The weights are not based on distributions because the total number of households would be duplicate counts.

The weighting process was conducted twice. The first weight generated used all respondent cases that had complete information available for six demographic characteristics. This procedure is valuable because it maximized the use of available demographic data. All demographics characteristics presented in the report reflect these weighted cases. Some of the cases may include "partials," i.e., those who dropped out before completing the entire survey.

The second weight generated was based on a different set of respondents, and could include those who did not provide all demographic information: it included all cases that completed at least 50% of the entire survey. This is a generous approach that maximizes the use of cases overall available for analysis. All substantive responses to survey items (other than demographic characteristics) are based on these weighted cases.

Analysis

We assessed the results of the survey through descriptive statistics and testing for statistical significance, including looking at results by race/ethnicity, and region (Rural Northwest; Urban Southwest; Urban West; Rural West; and Rural Upper Peninsula). The statistical procedures included a design effect to account for the cluster randomized design. All descriptive statistics presented are weighted using the procedure described above. For the purpose of testing for statistical significance, the race/ethnicity selections were converted into a binary variable (white non-Hispanic and people of color). The binary variable was created because the majority of respondents were white non-Hispanic. Due to the sample size, there was not enough power to see statistically significant differences in any other one race or ethnicity category.

The food security categories were derived by scoring the six food security questions using the methods outlined in the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form.^{vi} A score was calculated for all respondents that answered enough questions to be confident of whether they are food secure or insecure. The percentage of respondents with very low food security may be an underestimate because people with missing answers that fell into the low food security category could have actually had very low food security if they had answered all of the questions.

The validated two-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ2), which is a subset of Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ9), was used in the survey to estimate whether clients may be depressed. The questions used for this survey were “Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following”:

- a. Little interest or pleasure in doing things?
- b. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?

Response options were: Not at all (0); several days (1); more than half the days (2); nearly every day (3). A combined score on the two items can range from 0 to 6. Individuals who score a 3 or greater are considered in need of a full depressive assessment. Because some of the clients did not answer both questions, the estimated proportion of those who may be depressed is actually a minimum estimate, and could be higher if complete responses were available. Tool information is available on the American Psychological Association’s [website](#).

FACS Tool: Adjustments and Lessons

The team used the *Feeding America Client Survey* (FACS) tool developed by the Feeding America national office (FANO). The tool was modified in several ways.

- First, a number of changes were made to accommodate a shift from in-person interviewing to an online self-administered survey tool. This primarily influenced format, where a repeated series of questions with the same stem were changed to one “check all that apply” item. We added don’t know and prefer not to answer options—which were previously available but not directly offered by the interviewer. We also dropped some of the introductory text throughout that described why questions were needed or the purpose of

the section. Edits were made to prefer brevity over explanations, and decrease respondent fatigue.

- The second round of changes shortened and simplified some questions to lower the grade reading level. This was tested using MSWord's rating of grade reading level.
- Finally, we added items to delve further into client experience of the fresh product. These were integrated into an existing set of questions. We added an item to request contact information in order to deliver an incentive, which approximately 98% of people that progressed to the end of the survey provided. We obtained an entirely new translation of the survey in Spanish (which already exists in the platform), since so many changes were made to items.

It was more expedient to use the existing tool and platform than to start a new study. The FANO provided the team direct access to a copy of the tool on their platform. The team was able to make edits directly in that platform.

New time estimates were needed. Self-administered items can be completed faster compared to an interview format. We created new estimates for length of each section, tested it out at 12 to 15 minutes, and advertised it as 20 to 30 minutes. Based on the platform data, the likely average time for completion was 15-20 minutes.

Tracking was essential and required pre-planning. An important feature of the invitation process was the creation of multiple, unique links that lead into the one survey. This allowed the team to track the site from which responses were invited. The links had to be created in the data-collection platform (this is not unique to Qualtrics). Tracking that information was essential for estimating how well the responses were representative of all the distributions.

Respondent attrition is likely due to the length of the survey. There was a large number of partial responses in this study, most of which were ultimately culled from the final dataset. Future studies should use the shortest tool feasible while addressing their most pressing data needs to lower respondent fatigue. To gain and keep interest, incentives are encouraged for surveys longer than 5 minutes.



119 Pere Marquette Drive, Suite 1C | Lansing, MI 48912-1231

END NOTES

ⁱ Households served is a duplicate number. That is, households are counted twice if they attend more than one distribution.

ⁱⁱ See technical appendix for calculation.

ⁱⁱⁱ This estimate is based on (1) client inputs: average household size of 3.5 people; 73% of households have a total combined income in the last month between zero and \$2,000 (and 91% up to \$3,000); and 67% of households have a total combined income in the past 12 months between zero and \$25,000; and (2) a poverty threshold of \$21,720 for a family of three, and \$26,200 for a family of four. “2020 Poverty Guidelines,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, last updated January 21, 2020, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2020-poverty-guidelines#:~:text=They%20are%20issued%20each%20year%20in%20the%20Federal,instance%2C%20determining%20financial%20eligibility%20for%20certain%20federal%20programs>.

^{iv} Individuals who met this threshold are deemed to warrant a full depressive assessment. See technical appendix for method of estimation. A total of 13% were coded unknown.

^v One agency distributed remaining flyers at a second distribution after having a very low response rate at the first distribution. A second agency that distributed the flyers in food boxes, distributed some left over food boxes a few days after the distribution date. The latter was not counted as being distributed at a second distribution.

^{vi} *U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form* (Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, USDA, September 2012), accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8282/short2012.pdf>.