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Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses on the Impact of Online Ordering at Food Pantries by Low-Income Adults

Introduction: Food pantries provide a key source of nutrition and address key barriers to food security for low-income adults. Recently, some choice-based food pantries have implemented online ordering, a strategy designed to increase food pantry use by, for example, mitigating the high opportunity costs of waiting in line and stigma. This project investigates how the transition from an in-person choice based food pantry to an online ordering food pantry will affect pantry usage among low-income adults. We hypothesize that food security will improve among participants visiting a food pantry that transitions to online ordering, but not among controls.

Methods: The study took place at four choice-based food pantries. During the intervention, one pantry transitioned to requiring all clients to order their groceries online. Clients at the control sites continued to choose their groceries at the point of pickup. 211 participants were surveyed at baseline between April and July 2023 with 147 participants resurveyed between October and December 2023. The primary outcome was food security status. Data was further analyzed for changes in food pantry wait-times and frequency of pantry use. Qualitative data were also collected concerning participant opinions about online ordering.

Results: A greater percentage of food pantry clients in the intervention group reported using the pantry once a month after the intervention compared to a majority of participants visiting the pantry more than once per month at baseline. This trend was not observed in the control group.

Food security improved from baseline for all participants after the intervention. This was more pronounced for the intervention group, though the change was not significant.

A decrease in time spent waiting at the pantry was observed for the intervention group only.

Clients in the intervention group reported that online ordering decreased wait times by facilitating food selection and allowing orders to be prepared in advance.