



RESEARCH ARTICLES

Characteristics of Home Delivery Food Pantry Consumers

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Keywords: Home Delivery, Pantry, Food Security, Transportation, Disability

<https://doi.org/10.52678/001c.128443>

Journal of Human Services

Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2025

This research reports the descriptive data of one of the first surveys of home delivery pantry consumers in the United States. Two hundred and thirteen recipients who live in the Capital Region of Upstate New York participated in phone surveys about their experiences using home delivery vs. visiting a brick and mortar pantry. Little is known about this population. We reflect briefly on the IRB process and the difficulties encountered and present considerations for future research.

I lost my car after losing my job. Even though I do not collect disability, I'm disabled...

Introduction and Background

This paper reports on the findings from a survey of 213 individuals, living in the Capital Region of upstate New York, who received their pantry items via home delivery during 2023-24. Home delivery of pantry items as a practice began in earnest as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Food Bank News, 2023a; Larison et al., 2021; Seal, 2023); little has been written about the practice (Ramoino, 2021). According to Food Bank News, (2023b) pantries intend to continue to provide home delivery post-COVID citing barriers to visiting brick and mortar pantries including lack of transportation, mobility issues due to age and ability, and difficulties that low-income families with children have juggling multiple and important demands (Martinchek & Johnson, 2024; Seal, 2023; Waxman et al., 2024). With the dissolution of many of the private public partnerships that were forged during the pandemic to assist with delivery (Door Dash is one example) and the lessening of COVID economic aid, pantries are scrambling to continue providing home delivery to those who are most vulnerable (Food Bank News, 2023a, 2023b; Martinchek & Johnson, 2024). We hope to contribute to the literature by increasing our knowledge of who benefits the most from home delivery of pantry items and provide support for policy initiatives which would further fund home delivery practices. In addition, we briefly discuss the difficulties and philosophical differences we encountered when we attempted to navigate our institution's IRB.

Food delivery sources (Instacart, Grubhub, etc.) have been a convenient tool for consumers with higher incomes, yet these tools remain out of reach for low income consumers (Wright et al., 2022). Few resources exist for consumers that could benefit from food delivery that are low income and

food insecure. One model that has shown to be successful has been in the senior community. The Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program is a grant program that supports meal delivery to seniors who are frail or homebound. This program delivers nutrition and a helpful support system to seniors by providing the opportunity to socialize with others, regular wellness or safety checks, and additional resources that seniors can access (Meals on Wheels America, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, food pantries all over the country adapted to the needs of their communities in innovative ways, one of which was by adopting the delivery model.

The Food Pantries for the Capital District adapted to this model quickly and began utilizing a home delivery model. The food delivery model for food pantries was having a positive impact on the most vulnerable customers (Weinstein et al., 2021), possibly because it allowed for socialization and wellness checks, similar to the OAA Nutrition Program. In 2022, 79% of the referrals to The Food Pantries for the Capital District indicated that they needed home delivery (The Food Pantries for the Capital District, 2022). It is clear that food delivery services need to be expanded to food insecure and low-income populations and that the need for food delivery did not end when pandemic era restrictions did. It is imperative to understand the population that utilizes the benefit of food delivery so that this vital service can continue.

Procedures and Methodology

We were contacted by a local organization that serves as a coalition for over 70 food pantries to conduct a survey of pantry consumers who have continued to receive their pantry items via home delivery post COVID-19. We subsequently engaged in a tedious and sometimes conflictual year-long review with our institution's IRB over our desire to use two senior bachelor's level social work students to assist with conducting the interviews and differing opinions about the risk of "shame" clients might experience in discussing their utilization of pantries. We ultimately decided to withdraw our IRB application and received permission from our Provost to move ahead as private consultants, students were not utilized for the interviews. For the interested reader, an article on the difficulties with the IRB and the role of academic IRBs in community-based research is forthcoming.

It is important to note we maintained the same rigor we would have used if performing the study under IRB supervision including the use of informed consents, secured surveys that could not be linked to the consumer, and the storage of the data in password protected devices. Data was reported to the coalition in aggregate style and open-ended comments were deidentified. In a separate independent study, students, utilizing SPSS and MAXQDA assisted in the data analysis of the surveys and open-ended comments. Recipients who requested home delivery were asked by coalition staff, after completion of registering for their monthly home delivery, if they would be willing to participate in a phone survey about their experiences. Recipients who were willing then had their names and contact information placed on a shared

document with the researchers who would then reach out to the recipient to conduct the interview. Potential participants were informed they would receive a \$10 gift certificate from a local grocery store as thanks for their participation. Verbal informed consent from the recipient was again obtained by the phone surveyor and recorded via a checklist. When the interview was completed, the coalition staff was notified so they could send the gift certificate to the consumer. Interviews were conducted by the two PIs and three volunteers from the coalition who were trained and supervised by the PIs. Of the 2,914 consumers who signed up for home delivery and were asked to participate, 379 consented (13%). Of the 379 who consented, 213 completed the phone survey (0.07% of those eligible, 75% of those who agreed to participate).

The organization which requested our services provides local support and resources to member pantries in the four counties across the Capital Region of upstate New York. They are active statewide and involved in advocating with state legislators regarding food security. They will use this data to advocate for continued use of home delivery services, support grant writing and marketing, develop and prioritize programs, provide legislative testimony to inform policy and funding, and educate member pantries about service users.

I have children - packing them all up and trying to get to the pantry around my work hours conflicts

Results

Our intent is to present the data and discuss key ways our studies population may differ from the general population. In addition, we will provide the reasons given for reliance upon home delivery of pantry items vs. visiting brick and mortar pantries.

The descriptive data is in [Table 1: Characteristics of Home Delivery Recipients](#). The average age of our study population is 46.6 with a median of 45.5; our youngest recipient was 21 and the oldest was 80. The majority of the respondents fell into the 55-64 age range. The median age of residents of New York State is 40 (U.S. Census, 2022) and the median age in the United States is 38.9 (U.S. Census, 2023). With regards to gender, our respondents were primarily female identified at approximately 79%; in comparison, Blakeslee et al. (2023) places the percentage of females in the general population at 50.9%. This suggests that our recipients are older and predominantly more female than the population at large. However, our study also showed that men in our study were on average older than the female respondents (54.41 vs. 45.16).

Our respondents had a lower rate of high school graduation as compared to the general population. The National Center for Education Statistics places the public high school graduation rate for the United States and New York State at 87% (2024). We did not query as to whether or not respondents

attended public or private school, nevertheless, the high school graduation rate for the respondents we surveyed was 70%. This includes recipients who received a GED.

Our respondents received federal and state disability at a much higher rate than the general population. We found that 40.4% of the respondents received federal or state disability as compared to the rate in the general population of 13% (Leppert & Schaeffer, 2023). We posited that the higher rates of those who received disability benefits along with higher rates of female gender are one of the reasons why the respondents have a much lower rate of yearly household income as compared to the general population. In our study, the median monthly household income was \$1300 with an average monthly household income of \$1547.81. The average monthly household income for those who reported receiving disability benefits was \$1504.04 vs. \$1571.00 for those who do not receive disability benefits. The median yearly household income was \$15600 with an average yearly income of \$18566.11. The US Census calculated the median yearly household income in 2022 at \$74,580 (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). The average household income in 2022 was \$126,500 (FRED, 2022). However, we found that female respondents in our study had a monthly household average income of \$1585.39 as compared to males who had a monthly household average income of \$1342.72. Females who answered the question about monthly household income do live in households with more people as compared to males (3.04 per household as compared to 2.28) which does suggest there might be others in the household contributing to the household monthly income either through work, disability benefits, or child support, but we did not gather information specific to this. And, we are aware of the data that shows high school graduates have a higher rate of income as compared to those who have not completed high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

We utilized the USDA Six-Item Short Form to measure food security (2012). As expected, we found that the majority of respondents experienced low or very low food security (83.6%). In 2022 the USDA found that 12.8% of the population in the United States experienced low and very low food security (2023). This suggests that the pantries are reaching the people they need to serve and strengthening the safety net for those in our society who are the most vulnerable with regards to food security.

Other authors have previously established that Black and Hispanic families have historically had higher rates of food insecurity as compared to white families; the data also has demonstrated this was exacerbated as a result of COVID-19 (CAP20, 2021; Marriott et al., 2022). Our study was predominantly comprised of respondents who identified as white (54.9%). We did not find any significant relationships between race/ethnicity, food security, disability, and employment which are areas that have been described in the literature as impacting the SES of Black and Hispanic families. This will be addressed further in the Conclusions section.

I don't drive and I have a disability, I have two young ones with special needs, I watch the kids

Respondents were queried as to why they depended upon home delivery to receive their pantry items. Transportation and Disability/Health were given most often as the reasons for relying upon home delivery ([Table 2: Reasons for Home Delivery Requests](#)). With regards to transportation related difficulties we included not being able to drive, not having transportation or having unreliable transportation, and the cost of automobile repair. Disability and health reasons primarily meant having an identified disability that impacted one's ability to move or carry items. Examples of this included neuropathy, congestive heart failure, being wheelchair bound, and agoraphobia. Trouble maneuvering was included for those recipients who identified difficulties with mobility as the primary issue rather than their disability and health. Interested readers may contact the authors for more detailed tables regarding reasons for home delivery utilization.

I don't walk - my knee needs to be replaced, [I have] excruciating pain, in a wheelchair, its life, I'm still living

Discussion

Little is known about the characteristics of home delivery pantry consumers and their comparison, as a population, to other pantry consumers. We found that our population was generally older, had a lower SES, lower rates of high school graduation, higher rates of receiving disability, and very high rates of food insecurity as compared to the general population. This would suggest these pantries are serving those in the Capital Region who are most in need of the safety net that pantries provide. Our data also supports what has been reported by pantries as to reasons why consumers requires home delivery assistance for receipt of their items. We posit that any policy which supports structural change has the potential to have an impact on food security for home delivery consumers. Examples of this would include increasing the amounts recipients receive on disability, working to improve the rates of high school graduation, creating affordable childcare options, and strengthening social security for older adults.

The organization we worked with has already begun using this data to further their program goals and refine their service delivery. It is clear to us this service fills a gap for those who are food insecure and struggle with disability, transportation related difficulties, maneuvering or mobility, and the demands of raising children.

Conclusions and Future Implications

We are curious about how this population might differ from those who continue to visit brick and mortar pantries for their pantry supplies. We will be conducting in-pantry interviews in the next year and intend to compare the descriptive data of the in-pantry group with home delivery consumers including the use of measures of association. We were surprised that the men in our study had both lower average household incomes compared to

Table 1. Characteristics of Home Delivery Recipients (n = 213)

Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Mean	Median	Min/ Max
	4	42	30	46	56	25	10	46.6	45.5	21/80
Gender	F	M	Trans	NB	NA					
	168	41	1	2	1					
Race	Hispanic Spanish Latinx	Asian	Middle Eastern/ North African	Black	White	Native American	Two or more	Other	NA	
	9	4	5	47	117	1	8	20	2	
HS Grad	Yes	No								
	149	64								
Highest Grade*	K-6	7-8	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior					
	7	5	10	1	24					
Post HS	Yes	No	Some College	Four Year	Masters/ Higher	Associate/ Trade				
	94	119	41	13	4	36				
Household size	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Mean
	58	44	36	37	18	8	6	3	2	2.99
Benefits	Yes	No	NA							
	154	57	2							
Benefits Received	SNAP	WIC	SNAP & TANF	SNAP & WIC	SNAP, WIC, TANF	Mean SNAP**				
	116	16	2	18	1	307.08				
Employed	Yes	No								
	49	164								
State or Federal Disability	Yes	No								
	86	127								
Yearly Income***	Yes	No	NA	Mean	Range	Median	Min Max	Std. Dev.		
	159	8	46	18566.11	60000	15600	0/60000	11463.324		
Hours Worked#	Mean	Range	Min Max	Range	Std. Dev					
	26.02	40	4/44	40	11.082					
Head of Household	Yes	No								
	179	34								
Veteran	Yes	No								

	20	193								
USDA Food Security	High/ Marginal	Low	Very Low							
	35	79	99							
Preferred Language	English	Spanish	NA							
	207	5	1							
County	Schenectady	Albany	Saratoga	Rensselaer						
	101	24	56	32						

*of those who reported highest grade

**of those who receive SNAP

***of those who reported income of those who reported hours worked

Table 2. Reasons for Home Delivery Requests*

Why HD	Transportation	Disability/ Health	Trouble Maneuvering	Supervision of Children	Convenience	Money	Age	Misc
	114	103	39	18	18	12	3	8

*respondents could give multiple response

females and were older as compared to the females who responded to the survey. This makes us curious about the protective factors that are in play for respondents, the types of outreach and how gender might nuance food security. We recommend larger studies with greater sample sizes that would allow for more sophisticated statistical analysis to formulate hypotheses and conclusions. In addition, increasing the representation of other racial and ethnic groups would allow for more exploration of the associations with employment, disability status, and food insecurity which points to continued need to make structural changes.

Home delivery appears to be a service which is filling a need, especially for those in our communities that struggle with transportation and health related difficulties. For many of our respondents it was a necessity. It will require dedicated funding along with policies that create structural change in order to support those in our society who are living with food insecurity on a daily basis.

Finally, we did not expect when we started this research to have such a provocative experience with the IRB process. We are seasoned researchers who understand and agree with the need to protect human subjects, yet we found ourselves questioning the role of paternalism with regards to client “shame” and couldn’t help but wonder if shame was more of an issue this time because of the changing demographics of food pantry consumers with more middle-class families relying upon pantries to make ends meet due to COVID-19 (Pennsylvania State University, 2021). Anecdotally, the interviewers noted that many of the recipients expressed relief at being able to talk about the circumstances which led to their having to use a food pantry despite having feelings of shame or experiencing stigma. Indeed, they overwhelmingly expressed thanks and gratitude. The literature on difficulties that community engaged research with academics poses for IRBs and community-based organizations (Collins et al., 2023; Fielding-Miller et al., 2022) is an area that is ripe for exploration and this is an area we would like to research further.

Conflict of interest

The authors state there is no conflict of interest.

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Acknowledgment

We wish to thank the Food Pantries for the Capital District, the volunteers who assisted with the surveys, and the respondents who were generous with their time and observations.

Submitted: July 30, 2024 EDT. Accepted: November 20, 2024 EDT. Published: January 20, 2025 EDT.



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