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Preserving Dignity in the Face of Hunger: A Study of Food Pantry Utilization

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Abstract

Hunger in the United States has become commonplace. Food pantries are now regularly used by millions of people. Once thought to be used by the destitute, today they are frequented by families, students, the elderly people who hold full-time jobs, and people who thought they would never have to seek assistance to have enough to eat. Viewing food pantries as a major foodways resource, this study focuses on how a New England food pantry seeks to give not just food but also integrity, respect, and hope. It employed a client satisfaction survey as part of an evaluation of the effectiveness of their food pantry and used the data for organizational transformation. This study shows how organizations can destigmatize the requesting food process and provide services in a humane way that treats hungry people as neighbors and friends, not burdens and failures.

Keywords

food pantries, hunger, poverty, integrity

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Personal Reflexive Statements

Yvonne Vissing—Poverty is a public health problem. Hunger and homelessness are preventable; I know this from being on the board of the New Hampshire and National Coalitions for the homeless. As the founding director of Salem State University's Center for Childhood and Youth Studies and as a UN Policy Chair for Child Rights, child well-being is the responsibility not just of parents but of communities. Access to nutritious food in a respectful manner is a fundamental human right, as seen through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Working with the Boostraps food pantry has been important because not just of what they do to help the community but how they do it. People have much to learn from them.

Joann Gu—For the past 30 years, I have been studying, researching, and teaching on social problems and societal issues but mostly on theoretical and quantitative basis. Working with Beverly Bootstraps Food Pantry brought back a lot of memory and emotions. As the trend of growing income/wealth gap going since mid-1970s, more and more American families are going to fall into the poverty category. I have been involved in the movement-building fighting for economic justice in Boston area and experimenting/researching for alternative economy other than capitalism (www.economicdemocracy.us) since 2009. I see Bootstraps Food Pantry as one of the models in that community members help members at the time in need.

Andrea Jones—As the program director at Beverly Bootstraps for more than eight years, I witnessed the firsthand effects on families and children who were food insecure. During my time at the agency, I witnessed the need for access to food shift dramatically after the economic downturn in 2008. We quickly realized that a different population needed to use the food pantry than who we had helped before. People who had once been financially stable needed to utilize our service to be able to supplement their income, to pay necessities such as their electric bill or mortgage. It too became evident that food insecurity was causing other detrimental impacts on public health, leading to health issues and increasing hospital visits due to lack of proper nutrition. The team at Beverly Bootstraps worked hard to ensure accessing the food pantry was an empowering experience and eliminate the negative stigma suggesting that food insecurity is a flaw of those who need assistance rather than an outcome of other extenuating circumstances. We truly felt our efforts helped change the public's perception of this issue in our community, an outcome that is still ingrained in that community today.

Sue Gabriel—Growing up, there were more than a few times that I was aware of the struggle caused by too many expenses and not enough income. When I was in Kindergarten, my single mother would sell our furniture on the front lawn if things got really tight. We were lucky to have family and caring people who would help us. This lesson was not lost on me. With only a couple of exceptions in my 28-year career, I have worked for not-for-profit organizations in an effort to help others. It is my belief that an equitable world would include nutritious food, safety, and shelter

for every human. Thankfully, I work in a community where good people seek to make healthy food available to everyone. If our country made this a priority, there might be only one food distribution system. Until then, at Beverly Bootstraps, we will continue to offer access to food that is distributed with dignity, personal choice, and nutritious offerings at the heart of our model.

Almost everybody knows somebody who personally deals with the issue of hunger and food acquisition. They surround us; the elderly who rely upon Meals On Wheels; children who see school also as a place to get breakfast and lunch; the impoverished mother who secretly keeps her infant's milk in the toilet tank to stay cool because she has no refrigerator; the disabled man who relies upon microwavable frozen meals he can't afford because he isn't able to cook; the inner-city families who have no place to shop for food except the corner store that only carries beer and processed foods; and those who realize that no matter how hard they stretch them, their food stamps always run out much too fast. Sometimes, we don't recognize the hungry because they don't let us know or because we don't read the signs.

The study of foodway environments focuses on much more than where one obtains food, calories, and nutrients. Where one gets food has important social, psychological, economic, and political contexts (Forson and Couniha 2012; Wise and Wallach 2016). Obtaining food from a farmer's market; restaurant; neighborhood corner store, mega grocery, gas station convenience store; or grandma's house, all have different economic, psychological, and social dimensions for the person giving, and receiving, the food. People acquire an identity of themselves not just from what they eat but from where and how they get the food (Culture Decanted 2014; National Public Radio 2016; O'Conner 2010). In short, food occupies an important place in our everyday lives. Its presence can be found in the nutritional, social, economic, and political arenas but also in our construction of personal and collective identities (Ichijo and Ranta 2016).

The study of foodways is not just about where people get food (Randall 2012). It also concerns relationships people have with the food itself as well as with those with whom we receive and share it. When people do not have enough to eat through customary avenues they may seek assistance from food pantries. Doing so is a public acknowledgment of one's impoverished or marginalized status. Asking for food has both frontstage and backstage impression management dynamics (Goffman 1959). We could be sitting next to someone who is hungry but fail to recognize it because hunger is an internal state that may not be externally visible. People may use a variety of strategies to mask the fact that they can't afford food; saving face disguises the embarrassment of admitting that one is hungry.

Food giving-and-receiving processes are complex. Asking for food changes power dynamics in normal relationships, especially as people in need attempt to protect their dignity. This power differential between food givers and takers was shown in research by sociologist Elliot Liebow (1993) who volunteered at a soup kitchen. He was amazed at how insensitive many well-meaning middle-class providers were to the health, emotional, and social needs of the hungry people who lined

up to get their one meal of the day. One reason he hypothesized for staff insensitivity reflected social class bias; the majority of patrons at the soup kitchen were visibly poor and homeless while those serving them tended to be middle class. Being unaware of the backstory of people's, it is not uncommon for givers to intentionally or inadvertently engage in interactions that do not dignify those who are asking for help.

The food practices that organizations employ reflect social policies and our commitment to those in need (Algert, Reibel, and Renvall 2006; Chappell 2010; Edleman 1997; Greenberg, Greenberg and Mazza 2010; Harrington [1962] 1997; Raymor 1982). Hunger is seen as a symptom of a society lacking in social capital. Social capital includes shared values and cooperation efforts that link people together to create stronger networks to sustain society. Investing in others and interpersonal relationships that promote well-being increases social capital. People who care, who feel connected with others, and view sharing as a priority go out of their way, so others don't go hungry. But not feeling an obligation to promote the well-being of others depletes social capital. When social capital is low, the gap in wealth between the haves and have-nots tends to grow, as does the insensitivity toward those in need. As social capital is depleted, the haves are numbed to the reality that many of the have-nots have no food; they may feel no need to share and view cuts to food and sustenance programs as acceptable (Ikerd 2006; Koenig 2011).

Food pantries and soup kitchens face new challenges because of an increased demand for food assistance and a changing clientele. The administrators of the food pantry examined in this study, Beverly Bootstraps, were sensitive to issues of social capital building and the dangers of the type of interpersonal bias that Liebow discussed. They felt their organization had designed a food acquisition system that would meet both the nutritional and emotional needs of those who applied for food assistance. Did the patrons feel that this had occurred? This is the focus of the study described here. In the sections that follow, first the changing face of hunger in the United States will be reviewed, followed by a discussion of how demographic changes in food assistance impacts food pantries.

The New Hungry in America

Despite belief that hunger occurs mostly in third-world-type societies, hunger is a more significant problem in the United States than in many other nations throughout the world (Algert et al. 2006; Biggerstaff, Morris, and Nichols-Casebolt 2000; Cafferty 2010; Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011; Feeding America 2016b; Katz and Stern 2006; Nord 2010). Increasing numbers of people are hungry or have difficulty affording food, and as a result, there is an increased awareness of the new face of those who are poor and hungry in America (Cunha 2014; Moyers 2014; Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, and Carlson 2009). People who never thought they would be poor, hunger, or homeless have learned that they are not immune from such personal catastrophes. Economic challenges confronting U.S. families in recent

decades resulted in unemployment, bankruptcies, homelessness, debt, poverty, and widespread food insecurity (Alter et al. 2005; Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission 2012). The recession resulted in more people being hungry, as they struggle to make ends meet. "People who never thought they would need food are in need of help," said Mayor Sly James of Kansas City, MO., cochair of a mayor's task force on hunger and homelessness (Yen 2011). While income and benefits have declined during the last decade, the cost of food, housing, and health care have increased. Individuals and families in the United States experience the highest poverty rate in the 52 years for which poverty rates have been published. Data indicate that both poverty and food insecurity have increased substantially in the last 20 years to between 40 and 50 million people (or around 15 percent of the population), at the same time that median household incomes have declined (Domonoske 2016). Hunger impacts children, families, and single adults of all ages (Feeding America 2016; Greenberg, Greenberg, and Mazza 2010). Over 16 million children, or 20 percent of all U.S. children, live in poverty and food insecure households (Feeding America 2014). One in two people in the United States is now poor or near poor, and some foodways scholars indicate that hunger could become the new normal.

More people are hungry, they are eating less food, less often, and they are consuming less healthy (but more cost affordable) foods to stretch their money (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011). The traditional systems for hungry people to get food are insufficient in meeting the needs of most people. Over 72 percent of all Feeding America client households live at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty line, which makes it hard for them to purchase necessary nutritious food. The U.S. Census Bureau finds that without entitlement programs like food stamps, the rate of poverty would be even higher than it is (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2011; World Hunger.Org 2011). The number of households receiving nutrition assistance from the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has increased by approximately 50 percent since 2009. Over 47 million people nationally received food stamps or some other form of public aid, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics (Delaney and Scheller 2015). Even with this increase in people accessing food stamps, by most measures, the food stamp system barely fills the needs of hungry families. A survey of 29 cities conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2014) found one in four people needing emergency food assistance unable to receive it. This makes the assistance provided by food pantries of increasing importance.

More food stamp recipients are employed, middle-class people than ever before. Poverty and hunger are no longer relegated to the lower socioeconomic strata but are now regularly found in middle-class America, working families, and even among graduate students and those with PhDs. Of the 22 million Americans with master's degrees or higher in 2010, about 360,000 were receiving some kind of public assistance, according to the latest Current Population Survey released by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 2011. The rolls of people on public assistance may be dominated by people with less education but the percentage of

middle-class people and those which hold graduate degrees more than doubled between since 2007 (Patton 2012).

In short, who is hungry in American has changed dramatically. It is no longer just the poor and destitute. It is now the middle-class; the working-class; the elderly, children, and youth; and the middle-aged Americans as well. This complex multi-dimensional spiral of poverty requires that food pantry and soup kitchen workers be sensitive to patron's embarrassment and frustration surrounding their request for food assistance.

Food Pantries

What do people do when their incomes don't enable them to make ends meet for basic fundamentals like food? Their choices are sadly simple—they can creatively finagle their incomes and lifestyles to perhaps afford them, they can cut back on what they consume, they can rely upon others to help them, or they can do without. Ultimately, cutting back on the quality and quantity of what they eat is inevitable. This compromises health and social relationships (Aratani 2009; Lee and Greif 2008; Nord 2010; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2011; Sigman 1996; Weinreb et al. 2000).

Hunger exists in every county in America. It's an urban problem, it's a suburban problem, it's a rural problem, it's a personal problem, and it's a national problem. Where do people in need get food assistance? Six in 10 food insecure households participate in one or more federal food and nutrition assistance programs: the SNAP or food stamps; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children; and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). One in six people—almost 50 million Americans, or 15 percent of the population—receive food stamps (Patton-López, López-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, and Vazquez 2014). Almost half (45 percent) of all SNAP participants are under age 18. Over 21.5 million children received free or reduced meals through the NSLP, but less than half were able to access breakfast or summer food service programs (Feeding America 2016).

Despite providing critical assistance, federal nutrition assistance programs do not reach everyone at risk of hunger in the United States. Over one in four (27 percent) of the food insecure population in 2012 had household incomes above the standard eligibility thresholds for federal nutrition assistance programs, which means that they are hungry but did not qualify for federal aid. When times get tough and you can't afford to buy food for your family, food pantries have become an increasingly important resource to people from all walks of life (Cina 2008). For these folks, food pantries and charitable food assistance may be their only options to secure food. In 2016, one in seven people in the United States, or 46 million people, rely upon food pantries in order to get enough to eat. About 15 percent of the population regularly use food pantries, and 55 percent of them live in households in which someone is employed (Feeding America 2016; Mitchell 2014; Yen 2014).

So who uses food pantries? "Most people who come here are hard workers. They are employed. They are the school bus drivers, the lab techs in doctors offices, receptionists, the janitors who clean the floor of your children's school. They just can't make ends meet because some kind of crisis has hit them." Hunger in America (2014) found that of people who use food banks, most are white (43 percent), 26 percent are black, 20 percent are Hispanic, a third have at least one family member with diabetes; and two-thirds (65 percent) of households have a child under 18 or someone 60 or older. More middle-class and working families now seek food assistance for their families not to go hungry (Delaney and Scheller 2015).

Food pantries provide food to over 5.6 million households (Able 2003; Bhattrai, Duffy, and Raymond 2005; Bosman 2009; Feeding America 2016; Gotsis 2012; PR Newswire 2011; Mabli, Cohen, Potter, and Zhao 2010; Tiehen 2002). Increasing numbers of food pantries have emerged, they are serving more people more food, and estimates are that this pattern will only increase in the future (Feeding America 2016). This means that as a social unit of society that provides an important function to hundreds of thousands of people, it is time that they should be better understood from an organizational and sociological point of view. With requests being up 400 percent at some food pantries (Betts 2014; Germano 2012), predictions indicate that there will continue to be a steady increase in people relying upon food pantries to eat, unless structural lending practices, wages, and costs of living change significantly (Chumley 2014; Feeding America 2016; Mitchell 2014; U.S. Mayors 2014). As a result of the trend of growing hunger that cannot be met by traditional governmental assistance programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2014) has encouraged people to utilize food pantries as a way to supplement their food needs. This places huge demands on community-based food assistance programs to provide a wide array of nutritious food to increasing numbers of patrons that meets everyone's health and dietary requirements, to be open at convenient hours, to have enough merchandize for everyone, be at a convenient location, and be operated by a trained staff to deliver food to patrons. This is costly, complex, and has turned in charitable endeavors into businesses. This fact alone impacts how food is provided and how its transmission is received.

Food pantries vary significantly in organizational structure, hours of operation, and amount and types of food provided. They differ widely in eligibility criteria, policies, budgets, operation, and philosophy. Their staff members may be paid, but many are volunteers. The amount of training they receive tends to be quite variable and usually directed more toward filling bags with food than focusing on the intricacies of interpersonal communication during the exchange. Almost all pantries report demand growing at an alarming rate that stretches their resources to the limit. This requires that they find creative ways to finance ways to serve hungry people, especially nontraditional patrons. Most are sponsored by nonprofit, religious, and governmental organizations. Social ecology models indicate they fill the void in "food deserts" where access to food is unavailable for large segments of poor populations (Alkon et al. 2013; Berner, Ozer, and Payner 2008; Berner and Zellner

2003; Vega 2004; Chen 2010; Clancy, Bowering, and Poppendieck 1991; CNN 2010; Franklin, Stone, and Donaghue 2000; Goodison 2008; Greater Boston Food Bank 2010; Greene 2010; Gundersen and Oliveria 2001; Hoisington, Armstrong, and Butkas 2002; Kinsman 2010; Kramer-LeBlanc and McMurry 1998; *New York Times* 2011;Vitagliano 2010; Wehler, Scott, and Anderson 1992; Zedlewski and Nelson 2003).

Food pantries are an understudied social phenomenon that appears to confront two distinct trends—an increase in numbers of people who need food assistance and a change in their composition (Companion 2010). Historically, food assistance was provided to those who were "truly" destitute, but the range of poverty now is broader from those who are poor, severely poor, and poor but just above the poverty line. The range of people who are hungry has also expanded, from those who are starving to those who have insufficient or insecure food availability. The increased need and broader types of people who require help poses new demands upon food pantry staff. Participation of working-class families in food aid programs has increased recently as financial pressures pushed families to the breaking point. People who are embarrassed to apply for food stamps may turn to food pantries when they need assistance because the organizations tend to be less formal, and there is no official track record of need (Tiehen 2002). Individuals who may not qualify for federal assistance, those who do not have proper documentation, or people whose immigration status may be unofficial may find food pantries to provide them food that helps keep them alive. Food pantry patronization has become regular for food insecure households, who can't keep up with other bills (Algert et al. 2006; Clancy et al. 1991). Food pantries, thus, provide a valuable safety net for a wide variety of people.

Food insecure families use a variety of coping strategies to deal with insufficient food and maintaining their integrity in the face of hunger (Hoisington, Schultz, and Butkas 2002). Strategies include shopping for bargain/discount foods, using coupons and specials, searching for free meal sources, or accessing food assistance programs. Mothers have been found to engage in strategic impression management, so others won't know how hard it is to feed their families. Portion cutting; coupon shopping; eating the same thing multiple meals; recycling leftovers into new meals; using more pasta, rice, and beans; gardening; and sending kids to play at friend's homes at mealtime were common. Sharing restaurant meals, asking for doggie bags, or sneaking food from buffets into purses or backpacks to eat later were other strategies to stretch the food budget. Taking home food that others didn't want is also something hungry people do in order to save face. Households with incomes below 185 percent of poverty level were found to use more coping strategies attempting to deal with the stigma and stereotypes associated with asking for help (Algert et al. 2006; Bhattrai, Duffy, and Raymond, 2005; Campbell and Desjardins 1989; Hoisington, Shultz, and Butkus 2002).

Going to a food pantry isn't like shopping at the grocery store. Patrons arrive at food pantries with different emotions and expectations. As a result, they bring a variety of tender feelings that food pantry personnel may wish to consider. There are

complex social dynamics that play out in any food acquisition system, raising a range of important considerations for not just physical well-being but also mental health (Cannuscio, Weiss, and Asch 2010). Emotions people feel when going to ask for food include anger, frustration, shame and resentment (Vissing 1996). There is a view that someone shouldn't demand, question, or complain about what they are given. Hungry recipients are expected to be grateful and not to say anything if they are dissatisfied. Middle-class people are not used to being hungry and asking for food assistance. They are more inclined to make demands for purchases and negotiate when they are unhappy. They are a new class of food pantry patrons. Their embarrassment, frustration, and confusion on how to self-advocate while feeling vulnerable is an interaction problem for both them and those who are in the position of providing them food. As a result, food pantry staff may find themselves grappling with how best to serve them in ways that are both pragmatically useful and interpersonally respectful.

Staff members who work at food pantries are sometimes advised to be aware of these coping strategies and ways of impression management that people use to mask their shame over having to ask for food (Goffman 1959). Food pantry staff usually do not know why people apply for assistance; they may be unaware of financial and food assistance resources and programs for which they could apply (Brown 2012; Buchen 1989; Cashwell et al. 2004; Daponte 2000; Derrickson, Fisher, and Anderson 2000; Dinkins 1997; Hoisington, Shultz, and Butkus 2002; Bartfeld 2003). Food pantry staff require both resource information and interpersonal communication skills in order to be holistically effective in their positions.

Most food pantries require volunteers in order to function. There are many reasons why people may choose to volunteer. Given that often food pantry workers are volunteers, asking why they volunteer is a reasonable question. One director of another food pantry and soup kitchen near Beverly Bootstraps reported that:

> During Thanksgiving and December we have a large amount of donations and more people than we can manage asking to volunteer for us. They are nonexistent during the spring and summer months, when people still need help. We've come to turn away holiday season volunteers because they aren't really doing it for the people who come to us for help. They are doing it for themselves, so they can tell their friends that they spent their holiday working at the soup kitchen or packing up holiday baskets for the needy. It's the "see how great I am, what a wonderful thing I'm doing for the unfortunates" that drive us wild. Having people like this volunteer is just one more way the poor get exploited. The volunteers, of course, don't see themselves as being exploitative. But they don't show up any other time of the year, they're not regularly coming to help or donating items we need. Maybe they think they are doing it for the right reasons, but are they really? If they're getting something personal out of volunteering that is great, but it's all about them and actually isn't being done to help those in need.

Good intentions do not necessarily result in good communications. How patrons feel treated influences their self-esteem and their desire to return or use future services. Lee found when people visit food pantries, often they seek both food and solace, but often receive too little of both. Food pantry volunteers may carry assumptions that make working with recipients challenging (Buchen 1989; Farmer 2011). Liebow (1993) discussed challenges patrons faced when receiving food from soup kitchens and food pantries and noted that many try to manage complex health conditions through their diets. Food workers may not understand why patrons don't want certain foods or request others. If someone has to limit salt, is lactose intolerant, or has celiac disease and can't consume gluten, they must know what is in the food in order to avoid becoming sicker. How well food pantry volunteers are trained varies dramatically. Some are adequately trained, but most don't know how to deal interpersonally with people who ask for food. Pantries with a "beggars can't be choosers" mind-set alienate patrons. Liebow's work reminds us that middle-class families have to swallow pride to ask for food assistance, so it is important for those working with them to treat them with dignity and respect.

Beverly Bootstraps and Food Dignity

Administrators at the Beverly Bootstraps food pantry in Massachusetts wanted to conduct an evaluation to determine whether people who used the food pantry were satisfied with the services and treatment they received when obtaining food. The goal of this project was to provide both process and outcome data on (a) client satisfaction with the availability of food at the pantry and (b) to ascertain whether obtaining it was provided in a dignified respectful and efficient manner. Agency staff wanted information they could use to improve the delivery of food at their pantry. They felt it wasn't enough to just give people food—they wanted to know whether the manner in which the food was provided was viewed as respectful.

As background, Beverly Bootstraps is a large nonprofit agency that provides housing, social services, education, and other assistance programs to individuals and families on the North Shore of Boston. The food pantry emerged in 1992 as an outgrowth of work by parishioners at the First Baptist Church. Staff and board members realized that food stamps were insufficient to meet the food needs for most of their clients. The pantry started small and has grown in terms of the foods provided, the number of people served, and the sophistication with which they serve their clientele. It moved from the church to be located at the same premises as the rest of the Bootstraps agency's services, making it a convenient "one stop" for meeting a variety of client needs. Today, the food pantry has clearly defined processes that include application procedures, volunteer training, food acquisition processes, storage requirements, and policies on how clients are to be served. Food is obtained for the pantry from a variety of means including government programs, donations, and direct purchases made from agency funds. It attempts to buy products from local farmers, fishermen, producers, and distributors whenever possible. The

food pantry has proudly been able to secure multiple refrigeration units, so it can provide milk products, eggs, cheese, meats, and fish as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. It has arrangements with food banks, local groceries, bakeries, and restaurants for donated products. They also try to provide essential toiletries to families, such as diapers, toilet paper, laundry detergent, and toothpaste.

The pantry is not open all day, every day, but does offer hours at different days and different times to increase the likelihood that clients can get there at a convenient time. They even offer limited home delivery services to qualifying clients who are home-bound. A summer food program for people under age 18 is also provided. Over 5,350 nutritious lunches were distributed in six locations over the eight weeks of summer. It also provides a mobile market to six different locations as a fresh farmer's market that offers eligible households with fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition, it offers SNAP food application assistance, food samplings, and youth activities.

In order to collect data on the processes and outcomes used by Beverly Bootstraps, a triangulated design was used (Denzin 1970). This included document analysis, observations, interviews with staff, and a client survey. Documents analyzed included the agency profile, annual reports, grants, budgets, and its operations manual. Observations included a tour of the food pantry and multiple occasions of watching clients do their shopping. Detailed interviews with the program director and executive director were conducted. Focus group data were obtained from volunteers as well. In order to reduce costs for this study, it was decided that volunteers who worked regularly in the food pantry would be trained on how to conduct a semistructured interview and survey of the clients. The interview schedule of 48 questions was created in conjunction with the staff. In order to reduce costs and increased responses, volunteers familiar with the food pantry patrons were trained on how to collect and code the data in a thorough personal and online training protocol. Staff listened to lectures, watched video training, worked with the survey instrument, engaged in role-playing to learn how to actually collect and record the data, and they had the opportunities for questions and mentoring. In order to maximize client response, the data were collected over a six-week period of time. Both qualitative and quantitative data were then entered into data management systems for analysis. Descriptive, not inferential, measures were selected due to the convenience nature of the sample. The main outcome measures of interest included: Are food pantry clients treated with respect by the pantry staff? Do they get the food they need? How could the food acquisition process be improved both in terms of quantity and quality of food?

Every recipient family was invited to participate in the study. Participation did not impact their ability to get food. Clients were pleased to be asked their opinion of services and felt their participation would help both the agency and the recipients. Face-to-face interviews of 265 of the 300 families were completed. This high response rate is noteworthy and can be summed up in the statement of this mother: "I'm happy to talk with you about my experience here at the food pantry, especially

Table 1. Common Characteristics of Food Pantry Utilizers.

Characteristic	Percent
Female	67%
Mean age	47
Average family size	2.7
Homes with children under age 18	59%
Homes with children under age 5	36%
Renters	77%
Home owners	6%
Average household income	US$14,500
Number below poverty line	67%
Unemployed	78%
Homes with an employed member	40%
Receiving food stamps	60%

if it will help improve its operations," and in the words of this woman, "I've been treated really nice here and I'm glad to tell you about it."

Who uses the Beverly Bootstraps food pantry? As summarized in Table 1, the patrons tend to be middle-aged females who represented small families, with over half having children. They tended to be poor, with two-thirds living below the poverty line. Most were unemployed, rented where they lived, and relied on food stamps to help feed their families.

Almost two of the three people using the food pantry received food stamps, "but they are not sufficient to feed my family," patron after patron reported. "The week before we get them is really hard for us. If we didn't have the pantry, my kids wouldn't eat," a young mother said. Another mother disclosed: "No matter how hard you try to stretch them, buying fresh produce, meat and milk is expensive. If I'm trying to keep my kids healthy, that's what they should be eating, not filling up on pasta, rice, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to keep their bellies full." Another reported, "The food stamp allotment the government gives is simply insufficient for us to eat for the month. Nobody could make ends meet on that—I'd sure like to see them try!" A seasoned woman conveyed the bottom line: "The food pantry is essential to my feeding my family nutritious meals. If it wasn't here, I don't know what we'd do."

When people didn't use food stamps, it was because the application process was viewed as complex and designed to exclude people. Figuring out how to apply as a problem for some people; having all the paper documentation required was also an issue. People who were immigrants may not have all of the documentation the government required for assistance, so the food pantry became a very important resource for their survival. Fear of stigmatization of being on food stamps was a consideration, as this woman reported: "I was sure that the cashier and everyone in the checkout line was staring at me, sizing up every single thing I bought when I use my SNAP card. They could buy whatever they wanted, but even though I was buying

chicken, fruits, and vegetables, it's like they only stared at the package of cookies or the bag of chips like I was abusing the system." She went on to say that "I like coming here because everyone's treated the same; we're all in the same boat."

Food from the pantry was vital to sustaining the health of the entire household. Respondents (92 percent) shared the pantry food with the whole family; 695 people benefited from the food pantry's distribution every two weeks. Findings indicated that half of the recipients had been receiving aid from the food pantry for two years or more. Only a fifth had received aid for six months or less. The mean age of recipients was 47, which correlates with national data that middle-aged persons are now the largest group of food stamp and pantry users.

Interviews with staff and patrons all indicated that clients wanted nutritious foods. They preferred not to have processed foods. Foods in the highest demand were fresh fruit (68 percent), eggs (58 percent), and fish (57 percent). Staff members indicated these were the most expensive to purchase and hardest to secure foods, and the pantry tended to run out of the first because clients preferred them over processed and canned foods. Keeping meats, milk products, and produce required refrigeration units, which were large for their constricted operating space and expensive for the agency to purchase and operate. Staff identified if they had more refrigerators, they could keep more fresh produce and other high-demand products. There was not a high demand from clients for unhealthy foods (fatty, high sodium, and processed foods). Parents with younger children were concerned with having convenient foods that their children would eat or take to school. "Lots of kids at the school take Lunchables or food that's really bad for them; I feel good that I'm packing healthier foods for my kids. But they've got peer pressure to be eating the same kind of food as other kids, which we can't afford and that's not good for them. The pantry doesn't carry that kind of stuff, which is fine with me," a mother reflected. Food allergies affected 16 percent of the respondents, the most common allergen sources being milk (3.8 percent), fruit/vegetables (3.4 percent), nuts (3 percent), fish/seafood (2.6 percent). Gluten allergies have increased in recent years but were the smallest of the allergies. "We try to have something for everyone," a staff member stated. "What you eat effects your health, for both good and ill. We want to make sure that we keep everyone who comes here as healthy as possible."

Even with the food pantry assistance, hunger was a consistent theme among respondents. About 40 percent of recipients reported that they did not have enough food to eat in any month. Over 27 percent had to skip some meals every week. Several mothers confessed, "I do without so my kids will have enough to eat. Or I'll eat after they do and clean their plates for them. It's just the way it is." Fifty-seven percent of respondents wished they could visit the pantry more than every 14 days, which was the policy limit for clients. Because of food scarcity, recipients discussed ways they tried to stretch food to serve more meals and people. "I'm the queen of the leftovers," one woman said. "And the queen of leftovering the leftovers! The chicken dinner becomes a casserole the second day and turns into soup the third." "I've learned how to recycle food," another mother agreed. Three-quarters of the patrons

reported their lives would be adversely affected if they could not get help from the food pantry.

Respondents reported they depended on the food pantry and did not know what they would do without it. Patrons desired fresh vegetables, fruits, meats, fish, eggs, and dairy products, and it was challenging for the agency to keep enough of these products in stock. It is noteworthy that patrons wanted nutritious food. Expanding the food pantry hours would make it easier for people who struggled with work hours and transportation issues.

Survey data from the clients indicated that they felt well-respected when they came to get food. There was a discrete application process, and the information on clients was kept in a confidential way. The volunteers working the checkout made sure that each person was treated in a way that kept their information private. Patrons universally reported that they felt well-treated by the staff who worked at the food pantry. "I feel liked and respected when I come here," was a common theme reported by patrons. "We're trained to be," one volunteer reported, "but we're nice people anyway who chose to help because we care." It was clear that the food pantry staff had attempted to design a system that increased dignity and respect for their clients—and it worked successfully. They were able to feed the hungry in a way that did not negatively stigmatize their clientele. The fact that the majority of them had been coming to the pantry for over two years is another indicator of the comfort level and respect that they felt from the staff and the food acquisition process. "When people come here to shop at the pantry, we know everybody and we talk about how their kids are doing and what's new. The pantry is part of their community. They know we care about them," a volunteer worker at the pantry reported. Another said "When new folks show up, we know they might feel a little awkward at first, so we try to be friendly and make everything as easy as possible. We make them feel comfortable so they'll want to come back. And they do."

When asked how they were treated by the staff, patrons were universally complimentary. "The application process is easy. They keep confidential who's coming here for food, so unless you ran right into someone when you were here, you'd never know who else came," one patron observed. Another said, "People who work here are so friendly and nice. Really helpful." "I was afraid that I'd feel bad about myself coming here," one woman confessed. "But it's not like that at all. They make it feel normal. They treat me with respect. They're like my friends now," she said.

In sum, patrons were quite satisfied with the Beverly Bootstraps food pantry, both in terms of the food provided (80 percent) and the manner they are treated by staff/volunteers (93 percent). Recipients found the pantry hours convenient (90 percent) but would appreciate Saturday hours. As a point of note, as a result of our survey, the pantry did extend hours into the weekend and evenings so more people could use them, which is a sign that the organization actually did implement the recommendations made from patrons in this survey. Most of the respondents (95 percent) felt the food pantry intake process to be easy and convenient. About 88 percent were

satisfied with their privacy protection at the check-in and 93 percent were very satisfied with how the volunteers and staff treated them.

What Food Pantries Can Learn from Beverly Bootstraps

Food pantries are an important addition to the food acquisition system. Feeding the hungry requires more than the mere dissemination of food; it requires humanity in food distribution. Beverly Bootstraps chose to conduct a scholarly evaluation of its programs to see if patrons felt it was meeting both their nutritional and psychosocial needs. While some programs have assumed more of a beggars can't be choosers or a "take it or leave it" approach, Bootstraps wanted to find out how to make their program better for the patrons. A study was designed that gave voice to people who are often voiceless. The sheer act of choosing to employ a client satisfaction survey was a sign of the organization's commitment to honor the dignity of those whom they serve. The design of the survey, the recruitment and training of the volunteers who regularly worked with the clients, and the way the survey was implemented reflected their commitment to the respect the humanity of those who are hungry. The fact that the organization used the data to evoke structural and process changes that patrons recommended is another sign of their willingness to treat their patrons with honor and dignity.

Food pantries provide an important means of feeding people who are hungry. While government programs exist, they do not provide enough assistance for individuals and families to survive. Providing food to the hungry in a respectful way that protects their integrity is a way of ensuring the value of humane treatment for all. An *American Journal of Public Health* article states "Where a great proportion of the people are suffered to languish in helpless misery . . . a decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization" (Greenberg et al. 2010:2022). The United States remains the world's most affluent nation. Its proportion of poorly nourished and otherwise poor people has been growing. It appears that the governmental commitment to feeding hungry children, elders, and families will be cut in the future, which will only put greater stress on food pantries (McCarter 2017).

The Bootstraps Food Pantry is a port in the storm for the hungry in the Northeast Atlantic seacoast. It recognizes that hungry people come from all walks of life and that the social infrastructure has failed those in need. This little agency put together the good will and resources to help people in need with not just food but with the preservation of their dignity as well. This evaluation demonstrated the value of this nonprofit organization's willingness to develop research to identify needs and to provide useful information for future development practices. The organization has implemented the majority of recommendations offered through this research, focusing on issues that clients felt most strongly about. In this way, the survey helped Beverly Bootstraps in their quest to improve the lives of their food pantry clients through better service delivery. Developing interaction strategies that preserve dignity and empower individuals is part of creating humanity in society.

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