

## **Research Update: Arkansas Food Pantries and Perceived Barriers to Client-Choice Conversion**

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### **Abstract**

To address food insecurity, community-based food pantries typically distribute food to area residents using a prefilled bag/box of items (traditional method), or by allowing clients to select items (client-choice method). Prior efforts have found client-choice pantries are often preferred by clients, allowing them more control and dignity over their food choices. However, limited research exists examining barriers to client-choice conversion that pantries may face.

Many pantries continue to follow the traditional model. This is especially true in Arkansas, which frequently ranks high in the nation in food-insecure households. The Arkansas Foodbank (AFB) serves as the state's largest nongovernmental provider of food aid, working with over 400 pantries. Despite efforts by the AFB to promote client-choice conversion, in 2020 only 13% of Arkansas pantries offered client-choice.

To identify perceived barriers to client-choice conversion, we conducted a mixed-methods survey sent to 366 Arkansas pantry managers during spring 2021. The survey featured questions concerning the feasibility of and potential barriers to offering the client-choice option and had a

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response rate of 36%. Following grounded theory, a thematic analysis approach was used to code and analyze responses to the open-ended, qualitative survey questions.

Preliminary results uncovered five primary themes and six sub-themes, indicating perceived barriers to client-choice conversion. These included concerns related to pantry space and location (37%), volunteer and staffing needs (35%), lack of awareness concerning client-choice options (28%), COVID-19 concerns (27%), and perceived client greed and client distrust (12%). Our preliminary findings suggest food pantry stakeholders may need additional outreach and education concerning the various ways that the client-choice method can be implemented. Our results have important implications for those involved in distributing food aid to food-insecure households.

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