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Food Pantry Outreach and Research

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Food Pantry Outreach and Research

I. Introduction

The problem of hunger and food insecurity is a vitally important issue. Many solutions have been proposed and much research conducted, but, as the problem remains poignant, more work is still required. Approximately 12.7% of households in the U.S, about 42.2 million Americans, are food insecure (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2016). This food insecurity forces low-income households to pursue alternative sources of food. These alternative sources can include meal sites, shelters, government nutrition assistance programs, and local food pantries. The purpose of the current research is to examine the role of local food pantries in combating food insecurity and to make recommendations about how the pantry network might better serve its clients.

However, in addition to the pantry network, the other sources of food for low-income households must be considered. Sources such as federal nutrition assistance programs, like SNAP or WIC, are of particular note. I am personally very familiar with the SNAP program, formerly known as Food Stamps. I have worked as a SNAP Outreach Worker for two years. This outreach work included visiting food pantries, meal sites, shelters, and assisted living facilities across Rhode Island in order to help low-income individuals apply for SNAP benefits or to help them with any issues with their SNAP case. I was able to see the importance of SNAP firsthand for individuals to be able to afford food. For Rhode Island low-income households, SNAP provides 44% of meals, but 15% of meals are still missing. This highlights the need for research into more efficient strategies for helping low-income households to combat food insecurity. Local food pantries provide an excellent access point for interacting with these populations.

II. Approach

The methods for this project are reflected in the hybrid nature of my work this semester. The project had two primary focuses: food insecurity and the food pantry system, as well as the current research being conducted by the undergraduate students and the students' experience itself. To address the first focus, I completed a literature review of food insecurity and the role of the food pantry system in the U.S and in Rhode Island.

For the second focus, I assisted with research being conducted by an undergraduate research class, PSY302 (Applied Methods in Psychological Research). Working jointly with the Rhode Island Community Food Bank (RICFB), this class and its instructors administered hunger research surveys in local food banks across RI. The goal of the hunger research survey was to identify strategies and methods to better assist clients of the pantries. The PSY302 class was composed of 14 undergraduate junior and senior Psychology (B.S) students. Part of the curriculum for the class was the students traveling to pantries in the community to administer the surveys, by themselves or in teams. The survey itself was 45 questions with aims at gathering different types of potentially useful data.

I had a multifaceted role in the research process. First, prior to the start of the class, I assisted the researchers, instructors of the course, with the design of the data collection plan. My experience with the relevant food pantries from my tenure at the SNAP Outreach Project was useful here in terms of strategy, timing, and logistics. Secondly, once classes had started, we were faced with the problem that most of the students had no experience with field research or with being active in the community. Learning research

methods, techniques, and protocol was part of the class curriculum, and thus covered by the class instructors. Again my past outreach experience proved beneficial, as I could confer knowledge to the students prior to their going out into the field. I conducted outreach and sensitivity trainings in class to this effect. These trainings covered a wide variety of things, such as what to expect in the field at pantries, how to best work cooperatively with pantry volunteers, how to be both respectful and helpful to clients or participants, strategies to encourage engagement from clients, and also how to handle certain difficult situations while collecting data. Finally, I was responsible for coordinating with the local food pantries to facilitate data collection opportunities for the student researchers.

III. Findings

The tangible results for my project were somewhat disappointing, as there was no preliminary data from the research done this semester. At the beginning of the semester, it took longer than expected to get the student researchers out into the field to administer surveys. Additionally, while the students were out in the field, there was difficulty with client participation. Many of the food pantry clients simply were not interested in completing the hunger research survey, as it was 45 questions long and could be considered time consuming. Due to these factors, only a little less than 200 surveys had been administered by the end of the semester. Researchers had wanted more data, and thus the research is ongoing without any officially recorded results as of yet. Following is a list of the food pantries visited by student researchers through the semester:

- Tap-In – Barrington, RI
- East Bay Food Pantry – Bristol, RI
- RI Center Assisting those in Need (RICAN) – Charlestown, RI
- Coventry Friends of Human Services – Coventry, RI

- SVDP Emergency Food Center – Cranston, RI
- Edgewood Pawtuxet Food Closet: Transfiguration Church – Cranston, RI
- St. Peter by the Sea – Narragansett, RI
- Martin Luther King Center Pantry – Newport, RI
- Salvation Army Newport Corps' Food Pantry – Newport, RI
- Holy Family Parish – Pawtucket, RI
- First Baptist Church of Pawtucket – Pawtucket, RI
- Olneyville Food Center – Providence, RI
- St. Edward Food & Wellness Center – Providence, RI
- PICA Food Cupboard – Providence, RI
- South Providence Neighborhood Ministries – Providence, RI
- Trinity Episcopal Church – Scituate, RI
- SVDP St. Philip Food Pantry – Smithfield, RI
- Jonnycake Center of Peace Dale Food Pantry – South Kingstown, RI
- St. Mary of the Bay – Warren, RI
- Westbay CAP Market Place – Warwick, RI
- Cornerstone Church Food Pantry – Warwick, RI
- West Warwick Assistance Agency – West Warwick, RI
- Jonnycake Center of Westerly Food Pantry – Westerly, RI
- Connecting for Children and Families – Woonsocket RI

The survey itself was split into modules of questions targeting separate primary aims and types of data. Some of the general modules of questions follow here:

- Demographics
- Food pantry visitation habits
- Quality of service at food pantries
- Different types of services or outreach that clients would like to see at pantries
- Other sources of food
- Occurrence of spending trade-offs (i.e. buy food or buy medicine)
- Level of food insecurity
- Accessibility to community resources

Despite there being no data to analyze, the literature review completed alongside this work can provide some insight into what the eventual findings of the current research might indicate.

The literature review covered the 2015 USDA Food Insecurity Report, the 2014 Feeding America: Hunger in America Executive Summary, and the 2016 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island from the RICFB. The most significant highlights follow below:

Food Insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2016):

- 42.2 million Americans lived in food insecure households in 2015
- 13.1 million of these Americans are children
- 11.8% of Rhode Island households are food insecure
- U.S. households with children have a significantly higher rate of food insecurity (16.6%) than the national average (12.7%)
- U.S. households headed by Black, non-Hispanics (21.5%) and Hispanics (19.1%) have a significantly higher rate of food insecurity than the national average (12.7%).

Food Pantries Nationwide (Borger, et al., 2014):

- 200 Feeding America associated food banks with 46,000 associated agencies
- This network aids 46.5 million people each year
- 39% of all Feeding America households have at least one child
- 89% of these households with children are food insecure
- 55% of all Feeding America households receive SNAP
- 72% of the households that do not receive SNAP may be eligible

Food Pantries in RI (Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island, 2016):

- RICFB serves 59,000 people each month
- RICFB is the source of 9% of meals annually for low-income RI households
- 33.2 million (15%) missing meals in low-income RI households annually

Additionally, it became evident through the review that there is an alarming necessity for spending trade-offs in low-income households in the U.S. This means that the household had to make a decision between paying for food or paying another necessary expense. For low-income Feeding America households, annually, 69% had to choose between paying for food or paying for utilities, 67% between paying for food or for transportation, 66% between paying for food or for medical care, 57% between paying for food or for housing, and 31% between paying for food or for education. 79% of

Feeding America households report buying inexpensive and unhealthy food as a coping strategy to feed their family (Borger, C., et al., 2014). A final major takeaway from the review is that, as mentioned prior, SNAP provides 44% of meals annually for low-income Rhode Islanders (Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island, 2016).

IV. Discussion

Considering the information put forward by the literature review, there are several irrefutable initial conclusions to be had. First and foremost is the importance of the SNAP program. 47.6 million Americans receive SNAP benefits (Borger, C., et al., 2014). As can be observed above, many low-income households receive SNAP, which provides the vast majority of meals for these households. Despite this, there is also a large portion of low-income households, whether unaware or unwilling, that are not currently benefitting from their eligibility for the program. A second major highlight from the review is the necessity of spending trade-offs and other coping strategies for low-income households. Finally, there is a disturbing trend in households with children being more vulnerable to food insecurity.

These conclusions grant me a reference point from which to propose some tentative speculations on what the data from the current research might yield. I believe the most interesting module of questions will be the section about the clients' desire for other types of service or outreach presence at the food pantries. This might prove to be the most practically applicable information for the RICFB. The module of questions included federal program assistance (which could address issues with SNAP) and also utility and health insurance assistance among other types (which could address issues of spending trade-offs). Households with children might also benefit from this section, as it could

address problem areas in any corner of their budget. This data can be widely applicable and the RICFB could find solutions to these needs relatively easily, such as more actively enlisting agencies like the URI SNAP Outreach Project and other advocacy agencies. Similarly, based on the feedback from student researchers, there was significant interest in the survey questions regarding transportation. For low-income individuals, access to transportation means access to the wider array of community resources, which could benefit them in any number of different types of financial struggle.

V. Reflection

In the end, my honors project did not proceed as I had initially planned. From the start, I had intended my final product to be very focused on the undergraduates and professional development. The culmination of my work was going to be a self-help guide for undergraduates who were working towards applying for graduate school or pursuing other professional career paths. It was going to highlight the importance of community service and research experience. However, over the course of the semester, I decided that I did not want to keep the scope of my project too narrow. I wanted to be able to do justice to the hunger and community aspect of the project.

For this reason, I incorporated the literature review in order to have a more comprehensive overview of hunger in the U.S. I ended up being very happy with this decision as it also provided a much better perspective for me from which to frame the potential significance of the current research. While I did end up broadening the focus of my project, working with the undergraduate student researchers was still my favorite aspect. I enjoyed being able to help them prior to their experience in the field and especially hearing about that experience as they reflected upon it in class. As I said, for

many of them it was their first time going out into the community and interacting directly with low-income populations, or their first time conducting field research. I'm glad I was able to gather some feedback from them about their experience and I was even able to share some of their quotes on my poster.

The process was frustrating at certain points. One of my learning outcomes regarded firsthand experience with field research, of which I previously had none. This project definitely taught me some of the unfortunate realities of field research. The data collection process was a struggle, both in getting it up and running in the beginning of the semester and in the difficulties we encountered with client engagement. To put so much time and work into the project and end up without any results was a tough pill to swallow.

The poster itself also proved a challenge for me towards the end of the project process. For almost every section, there was more information I really would have liked to display on my final poster, even though I did get the chance to cover that information in the summary here. While making the poster, I was always writing too much, so I ended up having to go through an extensive series of edits. There was a constant struggle between succinctness and the necessity for sufficient information to establish my point. It came down to concision and space conservation, cherry picking the absolutely vital material over the simply important material, which was not easy for me.

Fortunately, I was able to overcome these difficulties and learn from them. Overall, I had a great experience conducting this Honors project, as I was able to accomplish my learning outcomes while also contributing to research beneficial to the community.

VI. Future Recommendations

In terms of the benefit of having the PSY302 class conduct this research, I believe the endeavor was extremely successful, and I would recommend its continuation. I know that, personally, I would have much rather had this practical and hands on experience, both with research and in the community, than my own PSY302 experience, which was entirely classroom based, with more reading and very little working with actual data.

There is something to be said for having the even trade off of the students conducting data collection for credit as opposed to hiring, paying, or trusting an outside party to do it for you. It also takes certain pressures off of the researchers. This being said, there were some undeniable obstacles that arose during the process. Most of these I believe could be resolved through some simple planning and adjustment. The primary thing is more time. Planning the research approach and strategy takes time. Training the students in what is expected of them and the proper research methods takes time. Coordinating with the pantries themselves takes time. And, were the same process to be followed for a consecutive, brand new class, this would have to be done all over again.

The most effective solution here is extending from just the one semester. Doing this would mean more data collected and keep the process up and running for a longer period of time. This added time would be used more efficiently, as new students would not have to be trained or oriented and also the returning students would become more adept at their roles. They would be more efficient in going through the survey, they would be more effective at engaging clients and convincing them to participate, they would have better relationships with the pantry volunteers and a better understanding of both the pantry system as a whole and of the research itself. These students would be more invested and

thus more willing to help with data entry and eventually data analysis. Researchers would be more comfortable sending students into the field for data collection knowing their expertise.

In accomplishing this, future supervisors of the project could also attract students more inquisitive and passionate about the topic. The necessary strategy would be to reconstruct the credit distribution for the students. I would like this process to remain for PSY302 credit; so one option would be to offer a two-semester course that comprises PSY301 (another research methods requirement for Psychology B.S.) and PSY302. An alternative would be to involve PSY489, independent study credit. Dr. Andrea Paiva, one of the researchers this past semester, already did this to recruit one of the students to help with data entry. PSY489 is also a requirement for Psychology B.S. majors, and I remember being totally lost when it came to deciding what to do for it. If the opportunity had come along to knock out 302 and 489 requirements while also participating in relevant, community-oriented research, I would have jumped at it.

Even without adjustment, I believe the course to have been extremely beneficial to the students. They gained experience with research in the field, they learned about some of the difficulties of data collection and of being part of a research team. Many of the students were forced outside their comfort zones, and that is an optimal place for learning. They sat face-to-face with Rhode Islanders and their families, learning about struggles that affect so many. They saw what it means to help these people and to be active in their community. Hearing the students reflect back, I am convinced that this semester was a more than worthwhile experience for them, one of personal growth, just as it was for me.

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