

The Cost of Free Assistance: Studying Nonuse of Food Assistance in San Francisco

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Abstract

Nongovernmental free food assistance is available to many low-income Americans through food pantries, yet many do not avail themselves of this assistance. As the monetary value of such assistance can be over \$2,000 per year, nonuse poses a puzzle from an economic standpoint. This study uses original data collected through in-depth interviews with 63 low-income San Franciscans who did not use free food assistance from food pantries. The data paint a nuanced picture of the reasons low-income people do not obtain assistance from local food pantries. The study explores respondents' need for, knowledge of, access to, and acceptance of assistance. We find that overall, sample members concluded that the benefit of free food assistance did not justify the perceived effort and psychological costs involved. These costs included moral objections to taking food from others, perceptions of low-quality food, hassles and "drama," racial tensions, and the emotional toll of accepting assistance.

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INTRODUCTION

Hunger remains a significant problem in the United States. More than one in seven households in the country are “food insecure,” meaning that they have difficulty providing food for themselves at some time during the year due to a lack of resources (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, and Carlson 2011). In addition to government food assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), nonprofit food assistance forms a critical part of the social safety net by distributing food directly to people experiencing, or at risk of, food insecurity. This nonprofit assistance includes local food pantries, typically supplied by central warehouses known as food banks, which distribute groceries at churches, community centers, and other neighborhood sites. Although increasing numbers of people are turning to food pantries for assistance (U.S. Conference of Mayors 2011; Mabli, Cohen, Potter, and Zhao 2010), many low-income people do not utilize these services. This poses something of a puzzle from a purely utilitarian standpoint, as the value of this free food assistance can be upwards of \$2,000 a year, according to estimates provided by the San Francisco Food Bank. The determinants of food pantry service utilization remain poorly understood, with existing research focusing more heavily on use of government food programs (e.g., Blank and Ruggles 1996; McKernan, Ratcliffe, and Finegold 2008; Issar 2010). This paper utilizes qualitative interview data from a sample of low-income *nonusers* of food pantries in San Francisco, California, to better understand why some low-income households do not utilize free food assistance in their communities. Research in this area will help food pantries improve their services to address unmet food need, and contribute to an understanding of low-income people’s decision-making processes around nonprofit assistance.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Existing literature identifies several factors that contribute to nonutilization of free food assistance. To organize the concepts, and our results, we suggest that nonuse could result from a variety of decisions along a progression of need, knowledge, access, and acceptance. That is, potential users

might fail to utilize free assistance in their community if they do not need the assistance. Provided that respondents do actually need assistance, they may refrain from using that assistance because they do not know that that assistance exists in their community. Provided they both need and know of the availability of assistance, they may still refrain from utilizing that assistance because they do not believe the assistance is accessible (e.g., if they perceived assistance to be available only at very inconvenient times or locations). Lastly, low-income individuals may need assistance, know of assistance's availability, believe they can access that assistance, and yet still not *accept* that assistance for any of a number of reasons, including but not limited to social stigma and internalized attitudes about self-reliance.

Need

Research confirms that food-insecure families and families with lower incomes tend to utilize pantry services more than food-secure families (Swanson, Olson, Miller, and Lawrence 2008; Bhattarai, Duffy, and Raymond 2005; Daponte, Lewis, Sanders, and Taylor 1998). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, low-income people frequently report that they do not use food pantry services because they do not need the food (Daponte et al. 1998; Martin, Cook, Rogers, and Joseph 2003). Yet surveys about need often do not adequately capture the variety of hardship-driven behaviors and strategies some individuals use to avoid reaching food insecurity. When nonusers report that they “don’t need” services, this may simply be the result of a savvy use of substitutes – from the government, social networks, or personal ingenuity (Mosley and Tiehen, 2004).

For example, Edin and Lein (1997) interviewed hundreds of single mothers on welfare or in low-wage work, who found relying on cash help from their personal networks preferable to agency-based help such as that provided by food pantries. Consistent with these results, low-income individuals in North Carolina reported in focus groups that when they needed food, they relied on family members as a first line of assistance, followed by friends and then neighbors; only when these networks were unable to meet their needs and they had no other options did they resort to food pantries and soup kitchens (Ahluwalia, Dodds, and Baligh 1998). Thus, as people in need of food assistance may rely on their social networks

rather than food pantries, need must be understood as a subjective concept driven only partly by actual material deprivation.

For example, imagine two parents with the same low income and roughly the same expenses to cover food, housing, utilities, etc. But parent A routinely borrows \$100 from her mother to provide food for her children, even though this puts a strain on their relationship and she is not always able to pay the money back. Parent B refuses to accept such assistance (or it is not available to her), and so reports that she both uses free food assistance and “needs” it. We could say that parent A either does not need the assistance because she has access to another form of support or that parent A could objectively use the assistance just as much as parent B, but consciously chooses not to accept it for any of a number of other reasons. After all, that \$100 could be directed toward investing in the future, living in a different neighborhood, or other types of consumption if parent A had availed herself of the free food assistance available. Nonuse among low-income individuals therefore presents something of a puzzle from a strict utility maximization viewpoint. Why would some families struggling to make ends meet choose not to avail themselves of free assistance? This paper seeks to illuminate not only how individuals avoid being in need, but how they think about need and who is in need of food pantry services.

Knowledge

Individuals who do not use food pantries may simply be unaware of these services and how and where to access them. Several studies argue that lack of information is the main cause of under-utilization of different programs (Coe 1983; GAO 1988; Blaylock and Smallwood 1984; Aizer 2003). Duffy et al. (2002) surveyed nonusers and found that lack of knowledge about food pantries in their community was the main barrier to use. Oppositely, other researchers conclude that lack of awareness or information is not a primary explanation for food pantry nonuse (Daponte et al. 1998; Martin et al. 2003). Some low-income persons may know of assistance in the abstract, but not know of specific programs and how they work in their own community. This study will therefore consider the contours of respondents’ knowledge about food assistance, both in the abstract and in their own communities. Additionally, knowledge may be

a conditional concept; some individuals may report not knowing about a pantry on a survey instrument because they have not sought out that information. Probing the reasons for not seeking such information may uncover the underlying drivers of nonuse.

Information about assistance programs is closely related to social networks, which can facilitate food pantry use by spreading awareness and providing information (Duffy et al. 2002; Ahluwalia et al. 1998). We might imagine that people find out about programs through contacts that have already used them. Some studies have found that a large social network has a positive effect on the use of welfare (Bertrand, Luttmer, and Mullainathan 2000) and publicly funded maternal care (Aizer and Currie 2002). Those with networks that are not “plugged in” to the help afforded by food pantries may have less information about them, and thus may be less likely to utilize food pantry services. We investigate this possibility in our interviews.

Access

Another factor potentially influencing the decision to use food pantry services is one’s ability to access the pantry. Using data from Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC, Allard (2009) argues that social service assistance is not typically located in high poverty areas, which presents access challenges for those most in need. In a survey of low-income households in Hartford, food-insecure households that knew of food pantry services but did not use them primarily attributed their nonuse to difficulty getting to the pantry; many others reported that they did not use food pantries because it would be difficult to carry the food home – a practical barrier related to proximity (Martin et al. 2003). Similarly, in a survey of households that had not used food pantries continuously, 22 percent said they stopped because they no longer had transportation (Daponte et al. 1998).

Our study situates two of our three data collection sites in communities with direct access to a food pantry (either at respondents’ housing projects or their children’s school) to understand perceptions of access when services are offered on site, theoretically obviating access barriers. The other third of our sample comes from the wider San Francisco community, allowing us to contrast nonusers who appear to

have “direct access” to assistance to users who may not be situated near convenient and accessible assistance.

Acceptance

Finally, attitudes and perceptions around food pantries and the food they provide can influence utilization. Previous research found that individuals targeted by social services and food assistance agencies believed the benefit of these services often did not justify the time, effort, and risk involved in accessing the services (Kissane 2010; Dodds, Ahluwalia, and Baligh 1996). In a study of food stamp use, Daponte, Osborne, and Sanders (1999) found that eligible individuals do not enroll if the benefit is small; those who do not apply for food stamps frequently state, “it isn’t worth it” or “[enrolling is] too big a hassle” (625). By extension, food pantry nonusers may believe the benefit of free food does not outweigh the costs of obtaining it, and our research explores this decision-making process in detail.

Perceived costs can also be psychological. For example, a perceived stigma associated with receiving services could inhibit use of food assistance (Swanson et al. 2008; Dodds et al. 1996), food stamps, and nonprofit social services more broadly (Kissane 2010). Edin and Lein (1997) found that for some low-income mothers, assistance from public or private agencies was a last resort because it was “humiliating” (p. 146). However, other research suggests that stigma, embarrassment, and discomfort are not the primary deterrents (Duffy et al. 2002; Daponte et al. 1998; Martin et al. 2003; Daponte et al. 1999; Eisinger 1998). When considering stigma, it is important to distinguish between stigma perceived from the outside community (i.e., I do not use the pantry because others will judge me) and stigma perceived internally (i.e., I do not use the pantry because I would judge myself). These two concepts are only partially distinguishable, of course, as one might judge oneself partially because others consider a particular behavior a signal of something undesirable (like needing help or not being able to provide for oneself). But it is worth considering whether these “others” are a generalized and internalized other coming from the wider culture or whether they are an actual set of others in one’s social network or community.

Lastly, one reason that individuals might reject assistance is if they see food pantries as resources intended for those needier than themselves. Kissane (2012) found that low-income women – even when they reported having nothing to eat – did not seek help from nonprofit agencies, because they did not want to take resources from others they felt were more disadvantaged. Previous research suggests that people will often draw lines between themselves and imagined “others” to bolster their own identities and senses of self (Lamont 2000; Latimer 2006; Kissane 2012). Our research will take this question on directly.

The literature on food pantry nonuse raises further questions about how these factors interact with one another, how low-income individuals construct concepts like “convenience” and “stigma,” and how they make decisions based on these constructions. In-depth interview data can provide rich detail on beliefs, thought processes, and experiences, ultimately furthering our understanding about how individuals make decisions around food assistance and providing important information to policymakers and stakeholders seeking to reduce food insecurity.

DATA AND METHODS

Our sample consists of 63 interviews with primarily low-income individuals residing in San Francisco. We were interested in both general nonusers throughout the city and also nonusers with direct access to a pantry operating within their community. We conducted 23 interviews with low-income, primarily unemployed, San Franciscans from the general community; 19 interviews with residents of a low-income housing project with a pantry operating at its community center; and 22 interviews with people recruited from an elementary school that ran a pantry for parents and caregivers of children in the school.

We recruited interviewees from the general community by posting advertisements on sfbay.craigslist.org, a popular online classified ads website in the San Francisco Bay Area. The ads contained a link to a survey to help us determine eligibility of respondents for an interview. The 294 completed survey responses we received were screened for eligibility based on two criteria: (1) that they

had not used a food bank or food pantry in the past six months, and (2) that their annual household income was approximately¹ below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, a guideline the San Francisco Food Bank uses to assess need of food pantry services. Using these eligibility requirements, 89 survey respondents were eligible for an interview. We placed a priority on individuals who were unemployed, but ultimately some of our final sample included employed people and students. Interviews were conducted in November 2011.

We recruited respondents from the housing project site in person at an event coordinated by the Tenants Advisory Board as well as through door-to-door outreach with either the president of the Tenants Advisory Board or a staff member from the San Francisco Food Bank. All individuals who reported not using food pantry services in the past six months were contacted for an interview. These interviews were conducted in January and February 2012.

For the school sample, respondents were recruited at a community event, through a flyer sent home to parents with children at the school, and through an outreach coordinator at a local health clinic. We conducted 21 interviews in May and June 2012. The outreach coordinator focused on recruiting a wide variety of interviewees, though this resulted in interviews with three people who did not have children in the target school and two pantry users. Two of our interviewees contacted through community events were also pantry users. We interviewed them in hopes they would refer us to nonusers. In the end, we interviewed 14 people who were not users and had children in the target school. Table 1 (below) provides demographic information about all respondents and by group.

¹This was an approximate estimate because the survey asked people for household size and annual income in \$10,000 ranges. For example, the 2011 federal poverty line for a household of one is \$10,890 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). We rounded 185 percent of this amount (\$20,147) to the nearest \$10,000 to come up with an income cut-off. Thus, individuals with a household of one were eligible for an interview if they reported an annual income of \$20,000 or less.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees by Group

	Community, N = 23	Housing Project, N = 19	School, N = 21	Total, N = 63
Annual household income				
<i>Less than \$10,000</i>	9	13	5	27 (43%)
<i>\$10,000 - \$20,000</i>	6	3	7	16 (25%)
<i>\$20,000 - \$30,000</i>	6	0	2	8 (13%)
<i>\$30,000 - \$40,000</i>	0	0	1	1 (2%)
<i>\$40,000 - \$50,000</i>	1	0	0	1 (2%)
<i>\$50,000 - \$60,000</i>	0	1	1	2 (3%)
<i>Missing</i>	0	2	5	7 (11%)
Female	13	18	15	46 (73%)
Race				
<i>White non-Hispanic</i>	11	2	1	14 (22%)
<i>Black non-Hispanic</i>	1	11	14	28 (44%)
<i>Hispanic</i>	5	4	0	9 (14%)
<i>Asian</i>	2	1	0	3 (5%)
<i>Other, multiple races</i>	2	0	4	6 (10%)
<i>Missing</i>	2	1	2	3 (5%)
Average number of children	1.25	.89	1.95	
Age				
<i>18-30</i>	8	4	7	19 (30%)
<i>31-40</i>	4	2	4	10 (16%)
<i>41-50</i>	3	4	2	9 (14%)
<i>50-64</i>	4	6	5	15 (24%)
<i>65+</i>	3	0	0	3 (5%)
<i>Missing</i>	0	3	3	6 (10%)
SNAP (food stamp) users	4	10	6	20 (32%)
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) users	1	3	4 ²	8 (13%)

Interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and were typically conducted in relatively quiet, public locations including the Tenants Advisory Board building, a room at a local clinic, cafes, libraries, or local fast food restaurants, and occasionally a respondent's home. We audio recorded all but four interviews with the interviewees' permission.³ After transcription, we coded interviews using

²Five additional respondents in this group previously used WIC.

³One interview was not recorded due to a problem with the audio recorder, and three respondents refused to be audio recorded. In these cases, extensive notes were taken and typed up immediately following the interviews.

Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. We coded transcripts for both theorized and emergent themes (e.g., perceptions of access, shopping strategies, etc.).

RESULTS

According to our theoretical model, reasons for nonutilization of free food assistance can be organized in a framework of need, knowledge, access, and acceptance. In the results that follow, we argue that non-assistance is primarily a function of the latter two factors: perceived barriers to obtaining assistance, and outright rejection of assistance. In some cases, as we will show, the boundaries between these latter two categories became blurred, as perceived barriers to use fed into respondents' cultural distaste for the possibility of accepting assistance. Below, we explore our respondents' need, knowledge, access, and acceptance of assistance, drawing distinctions between the community, housing, and school groups and other factors where appropriate.

Need

Assessing whether someone needs food pantry services is difficult. The San Francisco Food Bank has no eligibility requirements for people utilizing services except, in some cases, proof of address in the area where services are provided, and uses income of 185 percent of the federal poverty level as a basic guideline indicating need.⁴ In Table 2, we provide the number of households of each size by income. All but two of the respondents lived in households with incomes under 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Given the high cost of living in San Francisco, it is difficult to understand how any household in our sample could not benefit from food assistance. That said, as discussed further below, reported income did not always provide a clear picture of need.

⁴Staff at the San Francisco Food Bank point out, however, that no sites check or screen people on income criteria against such guidelines.

Table 2: Previous Year's Income Level by Household Size

Annual Household Income	Number of People in Household						TOTAL in Each Income Category
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Less than \$10,000	11	10	2	5			27
\$10,000 - \$19,999	3	4	1	4	3	2	17
\$20,000 - \$29,999		1	4	1	2		8
\$30,000 - \$39,999				1			1
\$40,000 - \$49,999						1	1
\$50,000 - \$60,000			2				2
Missing	0	1	0	3	1	1	6
TOTAL for each household size	14	16	9	14	6	4	63

*Gray cells indicate ranges above 185% of federal poverty level based on household size.

Twelve respondents told us outright that they did not need food pantry assistance (3 community, 4 housing, 5 school). However, most of these respondents reported various forms of material hardship, leaving only a few that we determined objectively did not “need” free food assistance.⁵

Almost all of our respondents, even those who reported that they did not need assistance, reported hardships indicating that they could in fact benefit greatly from such assistance. For example, Deandra, a 31-year-old woman from the school sample, said she did not need food pantry services at the time of the interview, but she reported eating less for dinner towards the end of the month when money was running low. She also said:

Sometimes I don't have enough money for the cable. I pay my phone bill and I'll be stuck with the cable bill. Or I pay the cable bill and be stuck with the cellphone bill, so I have to call them like, hey, this is what I have. You guys have to wait 'til my next payday... Sometimes I have to get bus change because the [unlimited monthly] bus pass is \$25, and that's way too much, so... I've got to give them change every day.

⁵For example, Mark, a 45-year-old white man, reported on our survey that there were five people in his household, that he was unemployed, and that his total household income was between \$20,000 and \$29,999. On paper, he met our criteria for needing free food assistance. But upon interviewing Mark, it became clear that he and his family were able to make ends meet because his family lived in an apartment owned by his wife's wealthy father, who also gave them a car and a good deal of financial support that Mark didn't count toward his “income.” Such cases were rare exceptions, but are nevertheless instructive in the sense that some proportion of the low-income population will appear in need without detailed information on family background, assets, and support.

Capitalizing on the free food assistance available at the school might have freed up money to pay her bills or purchase a more cost-effective transportation pass. Cameron, a 25-year-old black man from the community sample, reported borrowing money from payday lenders to get by:

I did that quite a bit before. Probably say I did it faithfully for about five to six months, like every month I was borrowing back something because I started falling through the hole where paying out money that you really couldn't afford. You have to borrow again, and then, pay it back, and then, borrow it again.

Payday lenders such as these typically charge upwards 400 percent Annual Percentage Rates, and are widely considered predatory and usurious (Stegman 2007), even if they provide access to credit for low-income borrowers lacking such access. Nevertheless, Cameron resorted to these lenders again and again, entering a cycle of debt. Had he used free food assistance available to him, it is possible he might not have had to use this financial strategy.

Stories of (often severe) material hardship appeared again and again in our interviews. As with Deandra, these hardships extended into our respondents' experiences with being able to purchase enough food for themselves and their families. In total 20 respondents (5 from community, 7 from housing project, 8 from school) had recently skipped or had eaten less than a full meal because they could not afford enough food. Leena, a 24-year-old Indian American college student from the community sample, told us the following:

Well there's been times, especially like towards the end of the semester is when you just kinda start to not eat. I mean you get busy, but at the same time it's like you're running out of money. Yeah when we run out of money we tend to like, or if I know I have to make a trip to the grocery store, but I still have some food I try to make it last as long as possible before I have to go to the grocery store. Even if that means eating stuff that's a little expired.

Another community respondent, Miriam, a 27-year-old Arabic employed, single mother, said:

So what I would do is I would eat like breakfast and lunch, and sometimes like I skip dinner. You know if I'm like in a hurry I try not to, I don't wanna spend so much money on three meals a day, so I'll just, you know breakfast and lunch and that's it.

Parents typically skipped meals so that their children could eat. Joe, a father in the school sample living with his wife and two children, told us:

Interviewee: I'd say I skip every other day probably.

Interviewer: What about your wife and kids, do they ever skip a meal?

Interviewee: Well no, I make sure they [get to eat first]

Even respondents who did not appear to be going without the basics made it clear that their financial situation left no room for comfort. When asked whether she had financial troubles in the past six months, Maria, a single, Hispanic 54-year-old in the housing project, told us:

No, because like I say, I don't spend money on beer and cigarette, nothing like that. Everything like is tight, but—tight, tight.... I don't buy clothes, nothing... I paid \$20 cable. I have cheap. I talked to them always. Don't change because I won't have no money to pay. Then you gonna make me look no good, and I won't have no cable... I pay \$20 for a phone—no, \$17 for phone. The cheap—everything cheap. The cell phone is actually \$25 phone card if I have the \$25. If I don't have, I'm off... Last month, I didn't have it. This month, I save, and I have it. I don't know if I gonna have next month.

Maria's focus on cutting back wherever she could, and her sense of uncertainty about future financial stability, was typical among our respondents. Clearly, free food assistance could make a significant difference for these respondents and others like them. In the remainder of this paper, we explore the most common reasons why they do not utilize this assistance.

Use of Government Substitutes to Mitigate Need

Despite some respondents' relatively low reported incomes, we also found that government support enabled them to keep their expenses very low. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported receiving some type of cash assistance: through unemployment (13), welfare (11 received General Assistance or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), Social Security Insurance or Disability (21). We do not know whether people counted this cash assistance as part of their income.⁶ Thirty-five households received subsidized health care, either MediCal or San Francisco's local subsidized health

⁶For example, one of our respondents reported a total household income between \$10,000 and \$20,000. She earned about \$1,800 per month caring for her grandmother as part of a government program and her grandmother receives about \$800 per month in SSI, exceeding by about \$10,000 the income range she provided.

plan. The next most prevalent way people kept expenses low was through housing: 31 were living in subsidized housing and 4 were in rent-controlled apartments they had for decades. Twenty-seven respondents reported government assistance with food expenses: 7 received SNAP benefits and WIC, 16 received SNAP but not WIC, and four received only WIC. Only 10 respondents said they did not receive any of these benefits. Of the other 53, the average household received three different types of benefits, and some respondents noted that these were what allowed them to get by. For example, when asked about financial problems, John, a 55-year-old man in the community sample, told us:

I haven't had any struggles. Only because when I first got on SSI they pay you for one year retroactive, so I got a 21 grand lump sum, which meant down to under four, under five grand. Because of that, and because I live in a rent controlled apartment, and because I live in San Francisco which offers healthcare without cost to those that can't afford it, I have not had any worries. Had any one of those factors not been true I would have [had financial struggles]...

Still, John referred to himself as “broke,” “definitely low-income,” and in debt. Government supports helped some respondents meet their needs, but due to their precarious financial situations, these respondents were still in a position to benefit from free food assistance.

Use of Networks to Mitigate Need

Consistent with the literature, many respondents first relied on assistance from social networks when facing financial difficulties. Over half of the individuals we interviewed said they borrowed money or received other in-kind assistance (such as food) from family or friends to make ends meet. A few respondents received regular support with no expectation of repayment. For example, Cameron said:

I have a trust fund from [my mom]. She is a really good reason why I'm basically able to eat and be okay. I get like \$800.00 a month from trust.

However, regular support like Cameron received was the exception. Most respondents who relied on family or friends did so during specific times of need, often in informal exchanges. As Juan put it,

We kinda just pool together, help out, and that helps us to get over the hump for the next day or so like that, you know. You might run into, you know, like my sister has no income... Me and my brother and us, all of us just pool in if she run into a bill problem, we pay a water bill this month. We'll pay that this month, somethin' like that. You know, you gotta work together with family. You know?

Several others talked about frequent meal or food sharing among their kin and friendship networks as a way to distribute resources and help each other out in times of need.

A few respondents believed that the support of their networks would eliminate any need for food pantry services. Kate, a 29-year-old woman who was unemployed at the time of the interview, described how she thought her friends or family would react if they found out she was using a food pantry:

If [my friends] found out anything like that they'd just be like, come here and we'll help you and take care of you.

Donald, a 47-year-old white man living in the housing project, echoed Kate's statement:

Donald: My daughter, she's probably—they'd be like, "Why you doing that? Just come to the house and eat."

However, in almost all cases, network support was not sufficient to obviate the need for free food assistance. Cameron, the man who received a monthly trust fund payment, said of this money: "It's like a little bit, enough to live here kind of, but not really." Even Kate and Donald arguably could have benefited from additional assistance. Kate said she was "living hand to mouth," and Donald said he had recently had trouble paying his bills. The widespread reliance on social networks raises the question of why respondents choose to utilize their networks as a first line of defense against financial hardship, especially when such hardship in our sample was so widespread and frequent.

Knowledge

Another reason one might not utilize food assistance is if he/she does not know of its existence. We asked all of our respondents during the course of their interviews whether they knew of a pantry in their area. In total, 50 percent of the community sample and 34 percent of the housing project sample reported that they did not know of a pantry in their area. Corresponding figures for the school sample were more complicated, as the majority of respondents did not know of the specific pantry at the school, but the vast majority knew of other pantries in the surrounding community. As expected, the housing project sample was more aware of a pantry, given that the pantry operates directly out of an office in the

project. But even with direct access and a weekly pantry operation on site, a significant minority of respondents did not know of its existence. Still, despite reports of lack of knowledge, all of our respondents knew of the existence of free food assistance in the abstract, and most reported that they could find one if they searched for the information. This indicates that, while knowledge of specific pantries could be more widespread, lack of knowledge did not appear to be a very substantial barrier to pantry utilization in our sample. This point should not be overemphasized, however, as many of our respondents, when asked about how the food bank could improve their services toward the end of the interviews, reported that they should do more marketing to let people know when and where they could get food. And many also reported surprise when informed that the food bank perceived they could help more people. But this speaks more to respondents' perceptions about food pantries in their area than to lack of knowledge as a barrier to utilization.

Access

Provided individuals need and know about food pantries, they may not take advantage of those programs because of lack of access. In this section, we focus on perceived *physical* lack of access, because of proximity, health, disability, scheduling conflicts, etc. That is, people may perceive a lack of access because they do not think it within their means to utilize assistance. One-third of our respondents (21) mentioned that it was physically or logistically challenging for them to go to a pantry. The reasons for these barriers were diverse. Four respondents – students and employed persons – noted that the pantries operating in the daytime were particularly inconvenient because they were too busy or were at work or school when pantries were open. Kalia, a 23-year-old employed black woman from the housing project site, said:

If I had time, like I don't have time to go down there and all that. Then when I get home from work, I will get off work at 12:00 at night.

The timing issue also arose for parents in the school sample. The school pantry operates for an hour immediately after the school day ends. While convenient for some, four parents told us that because their

children participate in after school programs or attend on-site daycare, the pantry is closed when they arrive to pick up their children.

Another five respondents perceived using the food pantry as too physically demanding given the need to wait in line and carry groceries from the pantry to their homes. Donna, a 57-year-old from the housing project sample, reported that despite her financial need, she couldn't go to the pantry because of her disability:

They [her church] told me the places to go, but I don't go because I just – I'll be, too, like my arm and everything be hurting. First, the pain would come from here, all the way down, come all the way down here, and it would stop. Now it goes all the way down here and they want me to kind of like stop going out a lot.

In general, however, both types of limited physical access to food assistance programs were reported by 14 respondents.

For five more respondents the issue of timing arose in the context of planning and remembering to attend the pantry versus having a concrete conflict. Compared to most other food sources like grocery stores, restaurants, and convenience stores that are often open every day, all day, and sometimes 24 hours, food pantries typically open one day a week for a couple of hours. Schedules that change day to day or week to week because of inconsistent work schedules, job search activities, or changing course loads, may make pantry use intermittent or difficult to plan for. Jason, a single father currently looking for work, hadn't known about the school pantry previously and was reluctant to say whether the time would work for him:

I have interviews on that day at 1 p.m.... but if I can make it, I will. I will... I don't know, man – I'm gonna have to work around it.

Henry, a 39-year-old Asian man from the community sample, suggested that food pantries should operate every day:

Then I would probably think about using it. Because it's kinda hard; if you only have a community center that gives out free food once a week then you have to work around your schedule to that. Then if you get—if it's open seven days a week or five days a week then you have more options to go there.

While access was therefore somewhat problematic for a significant minority of our sample, it often paled in comparison to our respondents' active decisions to reject free food assistance. We turn to these reasons in the next section.

Acceptance

After individuals experience the need for food assistance, have the knowledge about where to get it, and have reasonable access to that assistance, use or nonuse is essentially a function of choice or acceptance. To organize our findings, it is useful to think of acceptance as a weighing of costs and benefits. The San Francisco Food Bank estimates that a week's worth of food from one of their pantries is valued at approximately \$40, meaning that with weekly use low-income San Franciscans could avail themselves of about \$160 worth of free food per month (or over \$2,000 per year). While free food that would cost money elsewhere might seem like a fairly large benefit to a needy family, our respondents mentioned numerous costs associated with using a pantry. In this section, we explore the common patterns of responses our subjects gave for rejecting the choice of free food assistance. In general, active choice and rejection of assistance was the predominant reason for nonuse in our sample. Motivations for choosing nonuse generally fit within one of five dominant themes: (a) a moral economy of need; (b) quality; (c) hassle associated with long lines, drama, and disorganization; (d) racial dynamics; and (e) the emotional toll accepting help would entail. We review each of these themes in turn.

Moral Economy of Need

A key theme that emerged from our sample is what might be called a moral economy of need. Eight of our respondents (six from the community sample and two from the school sample) explicitly refused to consider going to a food pantry site for moral reasons, even though many of them reported skipping meals and experiencing financial hardships. According to Ned, a white man in his 50's from the community sample:

I do the primary take care of paying the rent and utilities and there's been a bit of juggling on that, but my sister-in-law says, "Well, go down to the food bank." I'm

thinking to myself don't really have to. There's a lot of people that are in worse strikes than I am... There are people out there much worse off than I am, than we are.

Ned had been unemployed for nearly a year and his wife was also unemployed and on disability. He repeatedly used the interview to solicit employment prospects and was under a good deal of financial distress, yet he declined to consider food pantry assistance because of his concern about taking that food away from someone else. Similarly, Leena, the 24-year-old college student who skipped meals when money was low, told us:

Like I kind of feel like I, it should be kind of left to someone who might need it more than me. Like I don't wanna take the place of someone who has like three kids...

Leena suggested that the food was intended for others and it would be immoral for her to partake. She added that she was not yet at a point where she felt she "really" needed free food assistance, a distinction echoed by several others.

An additional 13 respondents (4 from the community sample, 2 from the housing sample, and 7 from the school sample), though they did not directly express the belief that it would be wrong for them to take resources from others, said food pantries were intended for individuals needier than themselves. Though she said she had recently had trouble paying her bills, Arlene, a 60-year-old woman in the school sample, said:

The food pantry is, to me, is for people that need it, the needy. They got people that got four or five kids. You know what I'm saying? And on food stamps and on that little bit of welfare that need it.

Arlene's response was typical of this group. Aliyah, a 22-year-old black woman in the housing sample, said:

Interviewer: What kind of situation would they have to be in to need it?

Aliyah: Where they don't have food that they can cook, or somethin' like that. They didn't get no money that day. They low on this. Like I said, they don't have no money.

Even though Aliyah reported having financial troubles and deferring her student loan so she could pay other bills, she suggested that her level of need was not high enough to warrant food pantry services.

Aliyah and others like her seemed to perceive a threshold at which individuals were “truly” in need – a threshold they did not feel they had crossed.

Part of the motivation for the current study was the San Francisco Food Bank’s perception that they had the capacity to reach more people in need. This is consistent with research showing that in the recent Great Recession donations to food banks in America’s largest cities has almost universally increased, in some cases quite dramatically (Reich, Wimer, Mohammed, and Jambulapati 2011). This is not, however, the perception “on the ground,” where respondents were often surprised when we told them the food bank wanted more people to utilize their services. They were under the impression pantries did not have enough resources. This perception may have served as the foundation for the idea that the resource should be reserved for more needy people.

Quality

Obtaining free food from food pantries may not be worthwhile if this food is perceived to be low-quality, as expressed by 20 respondents (9 community, 8 housing, 3 school). This perception seemed fairly widespread among diverse members of the community. We found the desire for high quality, healthy food to be a near universal preference in our interviews no matter people’s financial situation or cultural background. But many people in our sample perceived the food on offer to not meet these criteria. People from the housing sample had much more specific experiences and perceptions of the food. For instance, a recently unemployed 34-year-old black single mother, Ayesha, reported:

The things that they give away are expired or beyond the expiration date marked on the packages. Even lately, my mom goes almost every week and she’ll get things from them. When my kids go visit, she’ll give them things that she got from there. She gave my son some fruit from there... and it gave him diarrhea, he vomited three times that night in the bed, on the floor. It was horrible. It was so bad. I had to call her and be like, “Do not ever give my children anything you get from over there.”

When food is seen to be so suspect that it could interfere with a child’s health, it is not surprising that people will reject this option as a viable strategy for helping make ends meet. Some respondents went so

far as find the quality of the food offered them dehumanizing. According to Bettina, a Hispanic mother in the housing project sample:

I would say that when I went and got some food that was only two times. The first time they gave me some roast beef that was expired...I mean how come you gonna give away to the community food that is expired?...I mean come on? Are these community pet animal? Not even the animal should eat something bad.

We have little ability to assess the validity of our respondents' assessments of food quality. It is worth noting that a near equal number of respondents (19: 2 community, 6 housing, 11 school) thought food pantry food was good. Nevertheless it is clear that negative perceptions about its quality were paramount in some respondents' decision-making.

Hassle

Another cost to utilizing the pantry had to do with the process of receiving food. Respondents perceived pantries as having excessively long lines, being highly disorganized, and being potentially dangerous. Some told us quite directly that these kinds of hassles made using a pantry not worth it. This was an especially common set of reasons expressed by our school and housing project site respondents.⁷

It appears as though many respondents knew of pantries because of the especially long lines they see along the street as they pass. Ironically, these long lines were precisely what deterred them from using the pantry. When asked if he knew of any pantries in the area, Ronald, a 57-year-old black man who frequently eats prepared meals at a local soup kitchen, said:

There's a couple [of pantries in the area] but I don't like standing around the block... So I just pass them and do what I can.

A 46-year-old black woman, Shirley, said she would like to use a pantry, but the lines dissuade her:

They have all these tables, so you can drive past and see all this, like, ooh, they got lettuce over there. Ooh, they got tomatoes. Ooh, they got strawberries, look like

⁷Many of our community respondents, while they knew about pantries, had less personal experience with them. Thus, we are not suggesting that these problems are particular to these sites or to the types of respondents in these samples. Rather, having utilized a pantry before or seen one in operation in their neighborhood, these respondents were able to speak very specifically about the perceived benefits and drawbacks.

strawberries in a basket. You know what I'm sayin'? But then you go dang, but look at that line, man. That line way up the thing, you know what I'm sayin'? I ain't got time to stand in that line. It's gonna take at least about a hour. I don't have time.

While the length of the line deters some people, the atmosphere of the line and its perceived disorganization concerned others. Doreen, a 53-year-old black woman in the housing project site, told us:

I just said, I'm not going to deal with it. I can't—I'm not going to deal with it.

I don't go [to the food pantry] myself because of the drama. All the pushin' and all that. I'm too old for that [laughter]... That don't really make no sense for to do all that over somethin' that's free.

For Doreen, the benefit of free food she would receive was outweighed by the stress and “drama” she would experience at the pantry. Others said they did not want to be provoked by the unruly environment at the food pantry. A woman from the housing project, Bettina, reported:

To be honest, you know why I don't go?... Because first thing in the morning it's a crowd in there, OK? Because they're from here, they're black, it's like they barge in. It's not that I'm scared, I'm not scared but I avoid. I avoid because I could go to jail. I got kids.

Donald, a 47-year-old white man, echoed Bettina's sentiments:

I didn't want to deal with it. I didn't want to be part of none of that. My temper's real short, and it don't take much for me to get upset real quick and that... I have assault with two priors, so I can't afford to go back to jail for none of that no more, so I just—all that line, all them people just shoving and pushing, stepping on all your feet and all that.

A few respondents in the housing sample also pointed to rampant crime and drug dealing in the area, as well as the possibility of being exposed to periodic shootings that occur in the neighborhood. Referring to the area right around the community center where the housing project's food pantry is held, Kalia, a 23-year-old black woman, told us:

Kalia: I live up the hill so I prefer to catch the bus like 'cause there'll be a lot of shooting right there...

Interviewer: Oh yeah?

Kalia: And I don't feel comfortable walking.

Interviewer: On that corner?

Kalia: Yeah. Today I walked extremely fast.

Thus, while these respondents have physical access to the pantry, and could take advantage of it if they chose, the hassles involved act as a de facto barrier to access making participation the benefits not worth the costs.

Racial Dynamics

Twenty-four respondents mentioned Asians or Chinese people when describing the food pantry, though we did not specifically ask about race in the pantry. The comments were almost all from people in the housing and school samples, traditionally black communities. Yet only about half of the respondents who mentioned Asians were black, suggesting that the association may be more widespread.

Nine respondents made either neutral or slightly positive comments about Asians, mentioning them matter-of-factly when describing the pantry, or noting their resourcefulness. The majority of respondents who mentioned Asians, however, had more negative connotations – some quite negative. Several respondents associated Asians with the long lines at the pantry; a couple reported that these groups would get in line early and by the time the respondents arrived at the pantry, the line would already be very long. As discussed above, long lines deterred some respondents. Six respondents linked the chaotic pantry atmosphere – another deterrent – to the Asians at the pantry, typically saying they cut in line, pushed, and/or were rude. Janet, a single mother of three in the school sample, said:

I got discouraged because it's like there'd just be so many people like—well the Asian people and they come, you know what I'm saying. They cut in line. They had a friend hold their spot. Then they bring five people in front of you. You know, it's just frustrating. Then you've got to wait three hours sometimes. It's like, I mean, it was so frustrating, I just said, I can't do it. I mean, even though it is free food, you know what I'm saying, vegetables and whatever and stuff but I was like my sanity. You know, I mean. They're just like, just cutting and they're pushing and they're coughing all over you, ooo, I'm like, don't get me wrong, I'm not prejudice in any kind of way, you know what I'm saying.

Janet's comment illustrates how some respondents saw significant psychological costs to the food pantry, and attributed these costs to the Asian patrons.

A handful of respondents (5) seemed concerned that Asian users were not from the community the pantry was intended to serve. When providing reasons she did not use the pantry, Arlene, a black 62-year-old caring for two of her elementary school-age nieces said:

First of all, my health issue. Second of all, the Asians just out of control, and I feel like, say for instance my church. My church have a pantry... All of the sudden, these people, when I can see them four blocks before I get to my church in line. They don't go to our church, and I don't feel like they should have first priority. I really don't. I really don't... We can't go to [their neighborhoods]. They look at us like we stupid if we go [there], and will tell you they not gonna serve you... So why should they come over here?

Arlene and others appeared annoyed by outsiders coming in early and “taking” the majority of the “good” food before community residents could access it. Our data cannot confirm that individuals who were ineligible and/or not residents of the community were accessing or monopolizing services, but it was a key theme and irritant for some respondents.

Six respondents noted that some Asian users or “foreigners” take food pantry food and sell it to make a profit, and one additional respondent talked about it but did not specifically mention Asians. These respondents unanimously expressed distaste for this behavior. According to Randy, a 41-year-old white man from the community sample:

I'm noticing a lot of times—don't know if you notice—little old ladies, Asian ladies, they get that food for free and they'll go sell it. I think that's wrong. I really do, and I think something should be done about that.

Randy added that additional enforcement to eliminate this misuse was needed. Two respondents linked the practice of selling food with the “greediness” they attributed to this group, and two others expressed concern that the practice of selling food took away resources from those in need. Observing food pantry users selling the food they received seemed to breed cynicism and distrust for the pantry, which contributed to respondents' negative views of the service.

Emotional Toll

Lastly, a number of respondents felt that to accept assistance from a food pantry would take an unnecessary and unacceptable toll on their sense of self and self-respect. We consider this sense

analytically separable from a sense of external “stigma.” Almost universally, our respondents expressed no reservations about friends or family members finding out if they were to use a food pantry or about recommending it to a friend or family in need. June, a 31-year-old, unemployed woman in the community, noted her personal reluctance to use a food pantry and was asked how her friends and family would respond if she used it:

Interviewer: Do you think your friends and your family, if they—if you did use it and they found out, do you think they would judge you?

June: I don’t think so. I mean, it’s funny, ‘cause it’s like they would be—just say, get it. It’s like easier for me to suggest it to somebody else, but I, I mean I think my parents have even said something like that before, like well, “maybe you should look into it” and blah, blah, but yet they would never do that for sure. Like their work ethic, like it’s crazy. You know? ... It’s just like—it’s like you know that you want your friends and your family to succeed and be healthy and do whatever they can, but yet there’s like this American idea, or who knows whether it’s American or not, but of like you’ve gotta work hard.

Like many of our respondents, if June feels any social pressure to not use a pantry, it is vaguely diffuse. Her personal friends and family have not indicated that they would be unsupportive. But, she seems to have internalized the idea that using a pantry would indicate she is without a “work ethic,” a particularly valued trait in American culture.⁸ It seemed that if any stigma was associated with pantry use, it was the self-imposed stigma that would be felt because of the emotional toll of admitting that one had to “resort” to pantry utilization. According to Selena, a 26-year-old Hispanic woman from the housing site:

I think it’s [the food pantry] nice. It’s good, but I don’t know. I think it makes me feel helpless. Yeah, that’s pretty much it... I just—I don’t know. It makes me feel helpless like oh, my god, really? Does it have to come down to this?

Or, as Ned put it:

⁸We leave open the possibility that the denial of stigma was due to social desirability bias, as respondents were talking to people they may have perceived as supporting pantry use. However, given that respondents were quite willing to swear, make racial generalizations, and reveal financial troubles, we doubt that if a widespread contempt for pantries truly existed it would be so consistently hidden across respondents.

There's a lot of folks out there that have families and literally got stuck between a rock and a hard place. First time going in would rather don't really wanna do it, personal dignity, self assurance, that type of thing.

These statements echo the earlier findings that pantry use is seen as something that people do as a "last resort," when facing an emergency and there is no other option. Accepting that assistance, therefore, is seen as succumbing to a self-perception of a person who cannot take care of oneself, reasons that are broadly consistent with findings in the food stamp literature about nonusers' desire to remain "independent" (e.g., Juarez and Chavez 2002).

For some, especially from disadvantaged groups, the emotional toll not only came from a self-perception, but an indignation that the food pantries and other assistance programs do not serve their communities better. Terrence, a 24-year-old black man who had barely eaten the day we interviewed because of lack of money, discussed a variety of factors that contributed not just to his nonuse but to the emotional toll free food services presented. According to Terrence:

We already have it as hard as we is, ya know as hard as everything is now. It's just too complicated to hafta' maneuver around like obstacles and barriers and people and it's just almost more of a hassle. I don't feel like there's any regulation to it so it almost makes you feel uncomfortable in a way in the sense that it's discouraging.

And later:

It takes a lot of energy outta' you and then it's like it's bad enough you're standin' out there in the line and stuff like that because you need that support. The last thing you wanna hafta' deal with is the people in line that aren't as appreciative as you are about the stuff and they're not there for the same reasons that you are there for the stuff. You're there to get the things so that you can cook 'em and that you can eat 'em and that you can, ya know, enjoy 'em and that they can help you survive and get by and make ends meet. Ya know you have a sense of real disappointment.

While few respondents expressed these sentiments in such strong language, we think it is possible that these sentiments are more widespread because those who voiced such concerns simultaneously touched on many of the same issues that other respondents noted as reasons for nonuse: long lines, disorganization, service to outsiders, and low quality of food compounding the other stresses financial

difficulty brings. It is entirely possible that as all of these issues pile up, respondents conclude that costs outweigh the benefits and that many of those costs are psychological.

DISCUSSION

The preceding findings highlight the fact that nonuse of food assistance emerges from a complex interplay of forces related to individuals' needs, knowledge, access, and acceptance of help. The results are meant to paint a picture of some of the key themes that came out of our interviews related to our central research question of identifying reasons for nonuse – some mundane and routine like knowing of a pantry or being able to get to it, and others deeply personal and sometimes moral in nature. Conflicts and hassles associated with pantries dissuaded significant numbers of our subjects, and these conflicts and hassles seeped into the personal toll taken on some of our respondents as they struggled to get by. Others appreciated the food pantries' offerings, but sought to distance themselves from “needing” the assistance out of the perception that to do so would be morally problematic because it would take food out of the mouths of others who needed it more. Our results thus depict a nuanced portrait of the factors affecting nonuse of an ostensibly free and valuable community resource.

Nevertheless, our study has some limitations. First, we were not able to cross-check our respondents' perceptions with the objective realities of the food and experience at the sites. Though we conducted informal observations of three food pantries, a full assessment of the veracity of our respondents' claims is beyond the scope of the current paper. Another potential weakness is that our sample did not include as many Hispanic respondents as we would have liked. Though Hispanics were a significant demographic in all three of our subsamples, we tended to find many more black and white respondents willing to be interviewed (partially because of our reliance on community volunteers from the black community). Thus, our ability to speak to this group's reasons for nonuse is difficult to firmly establish.

In sum, this paper establishes that utilization of free food assistance is often not seen as of sufficient benefit to outweigh its associated costs. These costs take many forms, from working around

busy schedules, to dealing with safety and hassle-related concerns, to perceived low food quality, to the psychological and emotional toll of obtaining these services. Our results should help practitioners develop effective responses to improve services and provide more and better assistance to those in need.

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