



FOOD PANTRIES CAN MAKE THE HEALTHY CHOICE THE EASY CHOICE

The field of behavioral economics offers useful strategies applicable to nutrition education. One set of strategies, known as “nudges,” are designed to leverage cues in the environment that can influence the decisions individuals make about their food, including encouraging consumers to make healthy food choices. Although often used in commercial food settings, there had been little exploration into whether nudges can assist food pantries in increasing client selection of more fruit, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy—foods Feeding America categorizes as “Foods to Encourage” (F2E).

The Feeding America Nutrition Nudge Research study was conducted by a team of research experts led by Dr. David Just of Cornell University and the Feeding America Community Health and Nutrition team. This study explored the potential of nudge interventions to increase the distribution of F2E and to learn food banks’ and food pantries’ perspectives on their operations and service delivery of nutrition education and F2E.

Whether it be displaying cabbage in an attractive bin, making whole wheat bread visible at multiple points throughout the food pantry line or adding a shelf tag that explains the health benefits of oatmeal, subtle changes to a food pantry environment have been shown to encourage clients to make healthful choices.

MOTIVATING RESEARCH QUESTION

Would the people served by Feeding America network food banks and food pantries be more likely to choose a specific F2E item if a nudge intervention was implemented? The learning objective was to determine if nudges could make a healthy choice, the easy choice.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Overall, the nudge interventions proved to be extremely effective.

Nudges increased:

- The likelihood a F2E food item was taken by clients
- The average number of F2E food items taken by clients

EXAMPLES OF NUTRITION NUDGES IN A FOOD PANTRY SETTING

Two examples of nudge interventions used in this study are provided below to help illustrate how the concept of nudges can be applied in a food pantry environment.

- The “Signage” nudge leverages the power of information in setting the stage for decisions clients make in the food pantry. For example, **a shelf tag with information about oatmeal’s potential health benefits and an appealing photo resulted in an increase in the likelihood that a client took oatmeal, as well as an increase in the total amount of oatmeal taken.**
- The “Multiple Exposures” nudge entails providing more than one opportunity for a client to select a F2E item. In the food pantry, whole wheat bread was offered at both the beginning and the end of the distribution line. As a result, **clients were more likely to select the whole wheat bread and to take additional loaves.**

NUDGE READINESS FACTORS CHECKLIST

- ☒ Does the food pantry have a **client choice** distribution style?
- ☒ Is there a **reliable supply** of the food item to be nudged?
- ☒ Is there sufficient **client demand** for healthier foods?
- ☒ Is there an opportunity to nudge **perishable** healthy foods?
- ☒ Is the **cultural appropriateness** of the food or the nudge being taken into account?
- ☒ Is there interest in nutrition education but **limited funding** available?
- ☒ Are different staff or volunteers within the organization **aligned** on nudges?
- ☒ Are the organization's **policies** supportive of using nudges to move healthy foods?

NEXT STAGE OF NUDGE RESEARCH

Implementing nudge interventions has been proven as an effective means of encouraging healthy choices and can be used in client choice food pantries. Nudge interventions work by removing subtle environmental and behavioral barriers that may prevent people from making more nutritious choices. This passive yet effective form of nutrition education complements existing efforts aimed at helping people facing food insecurity make healthy choices. Scaling nudge interventions throughout the Feeding America network has great potential to encourage the consumption of

healthful foods by individuals who may be struggling with food insecurity. This effort for scaling nudge interventions can also increase the distribution of F2E through food pantries. More insight is needed to understand the mechanisms driving the substantial effects that the nudge research team observed and to explore a wider range of nudge interventions. For more information on this and other health and nutrition initiatives targeting food-insecure individuals, check out HealthyFoodBankHub.org or contact nutritionteam@feedingamerica.org.

ABOUT FEEDING AMERICA

Feeding America is a nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs that provides food and services to more than 46 million people each year. Together, we are the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief organization. Our network serves virtually every community in all 50 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico.



ABOUT CORNELL UNIVERSITY

The Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (BEN) aims to apply principles from behavioral economics to encourage individuals and families in making healthy food choices. The Center's work began with the Smarter Lunchroom Initiative in 2009 and has since expanded the scope of its work to include other important sources of nutrition to children, including the hunger-relief agency setting currently being studied.



SPECIAL THANKS



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